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Awaken

ANYA RICHARDS

Dedication

To Phillip, with all my love. We're not perfect, but we're perfect for each other.

Chapter One

Once upon a time, in a land far, far away, there was a prince who, everyone agreed, lived a charmed life.

“So beautiful,” cooed his mother the queen, examining her winsome baby boy. And the prince grew ever more handsome as the years passed.

“So strong,” said the king with pride, watching his son approach adulthood, learn the knightly skills and excel in them all. Soon challengers were coming from other kingdoms, hoping to be the one to unseat the prince in the joust, best him at the royal tournaments. But none could.

“So fascinating,” whispered the ladies and their maids and all the women right down to the cook’s helper, who could only sigh with longing when the prince paused to speak to her.

“Such a lover,” thought the women the prince bedded, too tired to actually say anything after he was finished satisfying their every need—even ones they didn’t realise they had.

So it was that the prince, handsome and strong, witty and virile, began to believe all was right in his world—that he did, indeed, live a charmed life. And that enchantment, wherever it came from, whoever bestowed it, would protect him from all harm.

“No need to worry,” he told his mother with a smile when she remonstrated with him for practising his sword-craft without even a gambeson for protection.

“Do not fret,” he whispered to his latest conquest on hearing her father’s footsteps in the next room, just before swinging out of her bedroom window, three stories above the ground.

“Pish,” he retorted, albeit under his breath, when the king decreed it was too dangerous for the prince to go hunting without escort as he was wont to do.

Before anyone realised what was happening, the prince slipped away through the postern gate and strode out into the forest, bow and quiver slung across his back.

Bearing in mind his father's decree—and even though past his twenty-fifth summer, still inclined to filial rebellion—the prince went deep into the woods to elude pursuers. Soon he was far away from the castle and paused to listen, holding perfectly still so as to catch even the faintest sound of hare or hart, bird or boar. As he stood there, shaded by the drooping branches of a mighty pine, there was a sudden scramble of sound, a flash of movement, and a white doe and red stag bounded across the path ahead.

“Tally-ho,” whispered the prince to himself, taking his bow to hand, excited by the stag's massive antlers. “Tally-ho.”

Swiftly and silently he gave chase, following the beat of hooves, the bent branches and flattened brush giving testament to the animals' flight. Once he glimpsed them ahead, the milk-white doe having hidden in a small copse, the stag pacing back and forth to scent her position. Then the doe broke from the trees, and the stag gave chase once more.

Finally the sounds of pursuit ceased, and the prince crept forward to see the doe standing in the underbrush at the side of a grassy hollow, wild bracken and vines tangled about her legs. Triumphant, the stag paced forward, lowering its head as it pawed the ground. When it proudly reared on its hind legs, the prince had to suppress a gasp, for the beast was in full rut.

Slowly, with the utmost care, the prince reached over his shoulder for an arrow. His fingers had just touched the fletch when a voice—sweet and sultry as a summer's day, musical, rife with magic—said, “Well caught, my darling. What prize will you claim of me, although I believe I already know the answer?”

The prince's gaze swung from the stag to the voice's origin in astonishment. Where just moments before there had been a doe, now stood a woman of such rich and bountiful beauty the very breath was stolen from his lungs. Hair of moonlight hues waved around her perfect oval face, tumbling in a shining cloak to her waist. Full breasts, deliciously tipped with deep-peach nipples, peeked out from between the curls. Lower fell his avid gaze, devouring the curves of belly and hips, the plump mound between her thighs. Around her slender, shapely legs now twined flowering vines instead of bracken, the blossoms nodding and brushing against the pale, almost translucent flesh.

Entranced even through his shock, the prince lowered his hand to his side as his cock stirred, rising to press against the front of his breeches.

A deeper voice rang, filled with authority and lust combined.

“The chase is but a prelude to love, my sweet queen, as well you know. I will exact my payment kiss by kiss, touch by touch, until your screams of pleasure dwindle to a mere whisper for mercy.”

The stag was now a tall, muscular man with gleaming red hair falling to broad golden shoulders, and an erection as noteworthy as that of the stag. Strutting forward with all the assurance and power of a king, he waved his hand, and more vines fell from the tree above to capture the woman’s wrists and pull them skyward.

“Oh,” breathed the Faery Queen, for of course that was who she was. “You are a cruel beast, Your Majesty. How am I to give you satisfaction if I cannot move?”

But the Faery King merely laughed and grasped his massive cock in one strong hand as he replied, “My satisfaction is assured, particularly when you cannot move.”

The queen moaned and rocked her hips in enticement as her husband slowly brought his fist forward from the base of his erection toward the tip. The action made the already massive cock grow even thicker and longer, so it stood straight up along the rippling muscles of the king’s belly.

The prince knew he should leave rather than linger to spy on the king and queen of the faery folk at their love-play, but the scene before him was so seductive he could not force his feet to move.

“Just a moment more,” he thought, cupping his own distended prick through his clothes, causing it to ache with greater intensity. “Just a few little minutes more, then I will away.”

Still stroking himself, the king gestured with his other hand, and the vines holding his wife’s legs moved outward, spreading her thighs wide.

The prince gasped silently as the silver-gilt hair shielding her cunny parted, revealing a glimpse of the dewy pink flesh within.

“Beautiful,” growled the Faery King, stepping closer so as to gently sweep his wife’s hair back behind her shoulders. Now her nipples were almost cherry-red, peaked and tight with desire. “I think I will take my time examining your splendour before I do anything else. Perhaps I should pleasure myself first, so as to ensure my stamina when I need it.”

The queen struggled against her bonds, crying, “You beast, you wretch! Don’t you dare to leave me hanging here while you spill your seed upon the ground.”

But the king only laughed again, and made the vines lift her knees, so she appeared to be seated on a hanging chair, with her thighs spread wide. The movement left her most intimate flesh exposed, angled so the prince could clearly see the full outer and delicate inner lips, the pulsing clitoris. Even her sweetly puckered anus was revealed to his eager gaze. Groaning silently, he pressed harder on his prick, licked his dry lips, enchanted to see the sweet dew of the queen's desire glistening between her legs.

"Oh, but the sight of you, naked and wet with desire, is enough to make mortal or Fey lose control." Circling around until he stood behind the queen, the king leaned forward to kiss her neck, run the tip of his tongue along one upraised arm. "Surely you know the effect you have on me?"

"I can have a far better effect if you let me loose, my love."

The queen rocked her hips, setting the vines gently swinging, and the prince realised the king had his cock pressed up against her from the rear. The king's hands appeared, encircling her body, teasing just below the heaving breasts. Seeing the strong fingers splayed over the queen's delicate ribcage, golden skin contrasting to the milky flesh beneath, made the prince shiver. When the king's fingers feathered higher, drawing runes and symbols of passion on the queen's breasts, and she arched in response, wordless pleas issuing from her throat, the prince felt his testicles pulse in sympathetic delight.

"Just a little longer," he thought, loosening the lacings on his breeches, pulling his shirt out of the way. "Just a few minutes more, then I will away."

But he stayed and watched, growing more and more enthralled as the king's finger slipped along his wife's now rose-blushed cunny, teasing the plump clitoris, plunging into her channel until she cried for more and more.

And he watched that finger slide away to return from below and, using the queen's own juices to ease the way, slowly enter the little anus. The king's other hand plucked and rubbed the straining flesh above, and the queen screamed and writhed with delight, sending petals fluttering from the blossoms to dance in the air around them.

And he stayed, marvelling, as with a gesture the king caused the vines holding his wife to invert her body, until she hung upside down. She was now facing her husband, who thrust his leonine head between her thighs, as the queen engulfed that massive phallus with her mouth. Shivering, holding his cock tight so as not to spill his seed, the prince trembled to hear the sounds of that mutual kissing, the muffled cries, strangled sighs and groans.

And still he could not move, even as the last of the queen's bonds gently fell away, and her husband scooped her into his embrace. She wrapped her legs around the king's muscular buttocks, twining her arms around his neck and melting into the passion of his kiss. With a growl of conquest, the king thrust his rampant cock deep into her, and they both cried out in one voice with relief. Writhing together, hips connecting in perfect harmony, they stood in the middle of the clearing, and gossamer wings emerged from between their shoulders.

Still joined in passion, kissing, hands caressing and stroking and squeezing, they rose toward the sky. Sunlight caught the iridescent wings, which beat in frantic counterpoint to the ever more frenzied coupling. Looking up, the prince could clearly see the king's cock stroking into the queen's cunny, faster and faster, harder, deeper.

It was too much for a mere mortal to take, for the magic of the moment was overwhelming, and as the king and queen shouted their release, so did the prince find his own. His orgasm overcame him. The seed rushed up from his pulsating ballocks and out in relief-laden spurts. Closing his eyes in ecstasy, the prince knew he would remember this day to the end of his life, and perhaps even beyond.

"What have we here?" The cold haughty voice shocked the prince out of his lust-haze, and his eyes flew open to see the Faery Queen standing before him, sparks of anger gleaming in her sky-blue gaze. "A Peeping Tom—entertaining himself by skulking behind trees and spying on the unwary."

"Shall I strike him blind or dead, my love, for daring to watch us?"

The king's voice came from behind him, and a shiver of dread climbed the prince's spine. How stupid to have courted mortal danger by not doing what was right and leaving them to their play.

The years of knightly training awoke inside, and the prince reached for his dagger, tried to sidestep away, hoping to gain a more strategic position.

He could not move.

No matter how he strained and struggled, his body refused to so much as twitch.

"No," replied the queen in that icy voice. "He likes to watch, to see what others are doing, so I say let him be a silent witness." Her voice fell to a low croon, and she moved forward to grasp the prince's cock in her hand. The touch burned with arousing heat, making him instantly erect again. Under

her power, he sank slowly to his knees until he rested back on his heels. “Let him stay here for a hundred years, unable to move.”

Immediately there was a strange tickling sensation, and the prince realised his body, starting at the feet, was becoming cold, immobile—like stone. Up rushed the spell through bone and muscle and sinew, until the only part he could feel was his cock, still held in the Faery Queen’s hand. Inside he fought, trying still to break free, but the Fey punishment was intractable.

“One hundred years is not enough,” was the king’s response, which the prince hardly heard through the cacophony of anger and fear inundating his head. “I say let him stay here for eternity.”

The queen’s fingers tickled over the prince’s cock one last time, and she laughed. “As you wish, my love. He will make a fine adornment to this, our enchanted glade. A Peeping Tom wrought in marble.” She withdrew her hand and his erect flesh slowly turned to stone, until it matched the rest of his body.

No! The prince tried to say, but no words would come from his throat. *I meant no harm. Please, don’t abandon me here like this.*

But the king and queen of faery had already disappeared, leaving him to his fate.

Despair arose, as overwhelming as the spell cast by the queen, and the prince cried inwardly, repenting of his sin, although too late.

A rustling sound drew the prince from his misery and, to his surprise, he beheld the figure of a man emerge from the nearby trees. Tall, with a whimsical face and flowing golden hair, he approached and stood looking down at the prince, shaking his head. The faery’s long, mobile mouth was tilted in a hint of a smile, but the gleaming eyes were serious, almost sad.

Help me! the prince shouted, but of course he made no sound at all.

“If you must spy on the Fey in their enchanted places, my lad,” said the other, “you must learn more skill so as not to be detected. Alas, such advice is tardy in the coming, I see.”

Free me! the prince beseeched, and it appeared the other could hear him, for he slowly shook his head.

“Unfortunately, a spell cast by Mab is too strong for me to break.” The golden-haired faery tapped his chin and surveyed the stone-bound prince with what appeared to be some sympathy. “But as one who likes to watch to another, perhaps I can find some way to mitigate it.”

Thereupon he stepped forward and laid his hand on the prince's shoulder and chanted words unintelligible and frightening, in a voice so clear and sharp the very ground seemed to move. Surely, the prince thought, such a spell would be more than enough to free him?

But when the chant was done, there was no difference. He could neither stand nor move nor even speak, and his despair grew deeper.

The faery patted the prince's shoulder before releasing him, and once more the little smile tilted the corners of his mouth. "I told you I couldn't break the spell, but I have given you a chance to one day be free. Over time Mab's spell will weaken slightly, and on the awakening of another, you might find your own release. You will be safe asleep here until then."

I don't understand! the prince cried silently, horrified to see the other step back and an almost solid wall of bracken and weeds begin to rise between them. In a blink the vegetation surrounded the prince's kneeling form, encasing him in an impenetrable tangle. *Wait!*

But the faery disappeared, leaving the stone-entombed prince to his anguish.

Chapter Two

“If you show him your tits or, better yet, your quim, he gives you a penny, all for yourself.”

Myrina watched her friend Elawen carefully wrap the old woodsman’s provisions in a length of clean linen and, blushing, shook her head in bewilderment. “You don’t really do that, do you? Show old Gottreb your quim for a penny?”

Elawen laughed, face alight with mischief beneath her lace-trimmed cap. “Yes, I do, and gladly. He used to be the talk of the village—sticking his cock wherever it was welcome, and I hear it was welcome almost everywhere. Now the poor old soul can hardly move from his bed. Seems the least I can do to cheer him up.”

Curious now, as well as embarrassed, Myrina crossed her arms and leaned a hip against the kitchen table to ask, “What happens—after you show him?”

“Nothing.” Elawen took a piece of twine and began to secure the bundle. “He says his cockerel doesn’t crow anymore, but he still likes to see a bit of flesh every now and again.”

“Silly old man,” Myrina pursed her lips, still trying to figure the whole thing out, “to tease himself thusly.”

Elawen shrugged, tying the last knot and giving the package a little pat. “I won’t complain. If he wants to sit there, randy as an old goat with no chance of a swive to give him ease, I don’t care. I just take my penny and go.” She gave Myrina a saucy wink as she took off her apron and hung it on a hook. “I know where to show my wares if I want someone to handle them.”

They were still laughing together when Elawen’s mam, Goodwife Harbottle, came into the kitchen, a basket of vegetables on her hip.

“So, there’s time enough for laughing in the day, when the work goes a-begging.” With a little grimace, Elawen rushed to take the burden, as her mother continued. “While the rest of the world toils, ye can feel happy shirking your lot.”

“Eh, no, Mam.” Elawen put the basket on the table with a thump and gestured to the bundle sitting alongside it. “I was just going to deliver Woodsman Gottreb’s provisions, honest.”

Myrina reached for the cloak she’d hung on a peg near the door, hoping to slip away before she too got a taste of the goodwife’s sour temper. But there was no escape.

“Stay right there, Myrina Traihune, for it makes no sense to rush away now I’ve already seen you idling instead of fetching the eggs and going home to your poor sick mother. And as for you,” she turned her scowl on Elawen, “you’ll be going nowhere farther than this kitchen, my girl.” The goodwife reached for the recently abandoned apron and held it out to her daughter. “There are vegetables to peel and dinner to be made, and I wager you’re just the one for the job.”

Elawen scrunched her face into a woebegone mask, pointing still to the bundle. “But what about the poor old woodsman, Mam? He’ll go hungry if I don’t take him his loaves and cheese and ale.”

“Ha.” Goodwife Harbottle turned her back on the two young women and reached for a bowl. “Myrina has to pass near there on her way home. She can take Gottreb’s bundle.”

Elawen stuck out her tongue at her mother’s back, and Myrina had to bite back a laugh before she could reply, “I’ll be glad to, goodwife.”

Myrina set the woodsman’s bundle in the bottom of her basket and the eggs for her mother atop before swinging her wool cloak around her shoulders. The goodwife was still muttering and grumbling, but paused as Myrina reached the door to say, “Be careful in the woods, Myrina. Stay on the path, especially in the old forest.”

“Yes, goodwife,” she dutifully replied, but inside she dismissed the remark as the worrying the elderly are so very wont to do. After all, she was no green girl, stupid enough to wander away after posies. And hadn’t she walked through the woods a hundred times without even a hint of trouble?

Pausing at the door for a final goodbye, she had to bite back another laugh as Elawen mimed silently behind her mother’s back, “*Show him your tits!*”

If she did, Myrina mused, it would be the most excitement she’d had in who knew how long. Nothing strange or unusual ever happened in the village of Kessit, nor in the country around.

“Really,” Myrina muttered to herself, crossing the Harbottles’ dusty yard toward the south-bound road, scuffling through drifts of fallen leaves as she went. “I think ’tis the most boring place in the entire world, especially since Jecil left.”

Just the thought of her old sweetheart filled her with melancholy. He was the only man in the village worth a tuppence and, in turn, the village hadn’t been enough to hold him. Myrina had half-hoped he’d change his mind about going north to the city and joining the emperor’s militia, but in her heart she also knew it was what he needed.

Jecil wasn’t meant to be tied down in such a tiny place. If ever there was a man created to have adventures, it was he. Myrina understood, more than he imagined. There was a part of her that craved the same. Had things been different, she might have gone with him, but there was her mother to think about. The illness ravaging her body was slowly, steadily getting worse, and there was only Myrina to tend her needs. Besides, Myrina knew she didn’t truly love Jecil. Much as she enjoyed his company, and to some extent his love-making, she had always felt there should be more.

Elawen, with her seemingly unending store of knowledge, assured her there was. After all, she said, hearing Myrina’s halting, blush-filled account of the night before Jecil left, it sounded like the man didn’t have a clue about how to go about pleasing a woman.

Face screwed into a ferocious scowl, she asked, “He didn’t kiss your breasts?”

“No.” Myrina felt a fresh wave of embarrassment stain her cheeks. “Only my mouth. But—” she continued hurriedly as Elawen opened her mouth to speak again, “—he did touch me there.”

“Did you like it?”

“Of course!”

And it had been nice, at first. Then his fingers had pinched too hard, and she was too frightened to ask him to stop, in case he laughed at her. What did she know about that kind of thing? Perhaps it was something a body had to get used to.

It was the same when he put his hand between her thighs, his fingers moving and circling, making her gasp and moan with building desire. It somehow hadn’t seemed to last long enough. Before she could enjoy that feeling, he stuck his finger inside her body, making her want to cry out in frustration.

Elawen tried to get her to talk about the actual swiving too, but Myrina had cut her off, saying she just *couldn't*.

“Did you come?” Elawen asked. Seeing the blank look on Myrina’s face, she made a rude noise, and continued. “There is a moment when you feel like the pleasure is so big it will crush you, or tear you into a million pieces. It’s the best feeling in the world.”

Myrina hadn’t felt anything like that and said so.

“Eh, men can be so selfish. If I got my hands on that Jecil, I’d show him a thing or two.” Elawen flounced back on her cot and crossed her arms beneath her head, fixing Myrina with a knowing look. “What you need to do, before you find another lover, is figure out what gives you the most pleasure.”

“How do I do that without a lover?”

“Touch yourself,” Elawen said with a grin, obviously knowing what Myrina’s reaction would be. “Everywhere. On your breasts, all over your body, and especially between your l—”

“Stop!” Myrina covered her ears, inundated with mortification so strong she actually felt a little faint.

Elawen laughed, calling her an old maiden aunt and assuring her there was no other solution. A woman had to know what she liked, so as to tell a man how to go about it.

“Silly,” Myrina muttered to herself now, turning off the main road into the old forest, following the twisty path to Gottreb’s cottage. “Surely some men must know how to do such things without instruction.”

Yet Elawen’s advice lingered in her mind, and the memory of those fleeting moments when Jecil’s fingers tickled and rubbed her quim made Myrina’s skin heat. It was tempting to try, just to see if it were possible to find that shivery achy sensation again, perhaps take it even further. Although she’d said she didn’t want to hear anymore, Elawen had insisted it was possible to find that strange explosion of pleasure by herself.

Maybe she would try it tonight, in bed.

Myrina blushed once more just from the thought and knew she couldn’t—not with Mam asleep in the room below! She would have to find a place where she could be by herself and know she wouldn’t be discovered, or heard.

Suddenly breathless, she stopped on the path, lifting her head to catch the cool afternoon breeze on her heated cheeks. The woods were quiet, with

only the occasional distant birdsong and rustle of leaves breaking the silence, but there was something different in the air. Myrina didn't know what it was—a scent, perhaps, or a hint of sound too low to be truly heard—but it held her enthralled.

Letting the basket hang at her side, Myrina realised all her clothing felt too tight or too heavy. The light cotton shift abraded her breasts, her overblouse constricting her breathing. The wool of her cloak seemed too warm for the autumn day, and a sheen of perspiration gathered on her forehead, in her cleavage. Her petticoats dragged at her waist, emphasising the low, hard throb in her belly. And between her legs...

Myrina groaned softly at the pulsating longing rising in her quim, making it full, tingly, needy.

“Damn Elawen and her advice,” she whispered, believing her thoughts to be the cause of her discomfort and forcing her trembling legs to continue toward Gottreb's cottage. Walking only made it worse, for she could feel a slick of moisture on her thighs, and each step produced another jolt to the over-sensitive place between her legs. There was a dream-like feeling to her journey now, as though her body had taken over her mind and its desires were swiftly overriding all other considerations.

The woods were now completely silent, inviting in their solitude. She couldn't go to Gottreb's like this, trembling and panting, especially with what Elawen had said about showing him her breasts. Even that thought, distasteful as it truly was, made her quim quiver all the more.

She didn't realise she was leaving the path until the trees became so thick she was pushing her way through the low-hanging branches. Even then there was no fear, only an underlying knowledge that somewhere ahead lay the answer to her questions.

The woods parted like a curtain drawn back from a window, and she was in a grassy hollow paved with wildflowers and ringed with old trees which seemed to stand guard against intrusion. Sunlight streamed over the lush vegetation, making everything as bright and warm as spring. At one end was a thicket with a barely visible rock entangled in brambles. Enchanted, Myrina put down her basket and walked toward it, shedding her cumbersome cloak as she went.

Something about the place made her want to dance, to sing, to cast aside her clothing and become a wild creature of the forest.

The thought hardly crossed her mind before her hands were at her buttons, opening her over-blouse with dreamy haste so as to shrug out of the garment. And it took hardly a moment more for the tie at the neck of her shift to be undone and her breasts to be bare. As the sun touched and the breeze caressed her naked flesh, a sense of joy and abandonment overtook her completely.

The air seemed to tingle, come alive. Mixed in with the rustle of the leaves came a deep, entreating whispering that caused a shiver to rise along her spine. Caught in the dreamscape of her fantasy, Myrina followed its dictates, using the tips of her fingers to touch her face.

“Smooth,” she whispered in reply to a question hardly sensed. “Soft and warm.”

Lower drifted her hands, and Myrina shivered as they brushed the side of her neck. “Yes,” she murmured, exploring the hollows beneath her ear, the tendons of her throat pulled tight by her upturned head, finding sensitive places to heighten her pleasure. “There, and there.”

A command, desperate, desire-filled, and Myrina cupped the undersides of her breasts, lifting them as though to encourage a lover’s kisses. Slowly, teasingly, she slipped her palms along them, gasping as heat inundated her body. Yearning drew her nipples tight, made them so sensitive the very stirring of the air made them ache. Circling the puckered flesh with the pads of her fingers, Myrina moaned, almost wept with delight. Around and around, avoiding the very tips for as long as she could, shuddering, until the phantom voice cried out with frustration as deep as her own. Slowly, savouring the moment, she pinched gently with forefingers and thumbs.

“Ahhh,” she cried aloud, sinking to her knees, as waves of pleasure rushed from her nipples to reverberate deep into her body. Plucking and teasing, her fingers took on a life of their own, tightening almost painfully, then soothing the hungry points with butterfly strokes, only to tighten again. The spectral voice heightened her delight as broken words became images in Myrina’s mind.

He would suck, nip, lick her, adoring every beautiful inch of skin. There would be no surcease until she lay weak and writhing with desire, begging for him to stop—never stop. A full day, a full year, would he spend lavishing attention on her body. Holding her still beneath him, he would kiss her face, her neck, over and over, before drifting to her breasts. Oh, the time he would spend there! Did she know how lovely they were? How

passion filled him as he looked at them, watched her touch herself there? Did she realise how desperately he wanted to be the one making her moan and sigh and cry aloud with pleasure?

“Yes!” Lost in the dream, Myrina arched her back, longing for the touch of hot, firm lips instead of her fingers around her nipples. There was a deep pressure building inside her, like that of a kettle popping and jumping above the coals. Those lips, she knew, would bring her to full, rolling boil, and she needed it, so desperately.

He would kiss her belly. Did she know the pleasure that could come from that? He would show her, gladly. Kiss and lick there, and her fingers and arms and thighs—everywhere!

“Oh!” Faster and faster, harder then softer, Myrina’s fingers flew. The pulsing inside grew more insistent, and she pinched her nipples, tugging, hips jolting as the voice added layer upon layer of new sensations to her already overwhelmed system.

When she was ready, when he knew to delay would only cause her pain, not pleasure anymore, he would part her legs, touch her, find the place to make her scream with passion.

Myrina gasped, strung tight with need. One hand remained on her breast. The other had somehow found its way under her skirt, was travelling beneath her petticoats, searching for the place he described.

As she found it, placed the first tentative touch upon the quivering point, an image came to her as though put straight into her head by her eyes. Lying on her back, with a beautiful dark-haired man kneeling between her legs, his green eyes gleaming with desire. His lips moved. “*Beautiful,*” he said, strong hands cupping her bottom, lifting her until his firm, knowing mouth slid between her thighs.

Myrina screamed, the sound echoing through the trees, as a convulsion of pure ecstasy rendered her blind and deaf and destroyed to everything but the sweet pain of release. Again and again his lips tugged, his tongue flayed, until she could take not one moment more, and her hand fell away, and she lay quivering in a cloud of flowers.

Shocked incredulity at her own abandoned behaviour brought her back to herself, and she jumped to her feet, stumbling as her legs threatened to give way beneath her. What kind of enchantment had she fallen under? For enchantment it must have been, to produce such images and feelings! Even

now, no longer under its spell, she thought she heard that low, deep voice entreating her to wait, to stay.

Quickly tugging her shift to rights and grabbing her over-blouse, cloak and basket, Myrina ran from the glade, ignoring the voice, although the desolation in it brought tears to her eyes.

Chapter Three

By the time Myrina got to Gottreb's cottage, shame had displaced shock.

What had so overcome her in that glade? It was as though someone else, a different and unknown Myrina, had taken over her body and mind. And the voice in her head...was she going mad? 'Twas a frightening, sobering thought.

Pausing outside the woodsman's door, she wiped her face with an edge of her cloak and tried to compose herself enough so the old man would sense nothing wrong. After knocking and being bade to enter, she pushed the door open and went in, smiling as best she could at the elderly man lying on the bed.

"Good eve, Myrina. Have you brought my provisions from Goodwife Harbottle?"

"Indeed I have." Myrina placed her basket on the table and lifted the eggs out carefully before removing the package and beginning to unwrap it. "She sent a loaf fresh from the oven, butter, cheese, a side of beef and a jar of ale."

"Ah," sighed the half-blind old man, "the goodwife, bless her soul, takes great care of me. I don't know what I would do without her aid and that of you young people who bring the food. Once, not so long ago as you might think, I could hunt and catch my own food, going into the village only to sell my wood and buy whatever I needed."

Myrina nodded, bustling about the room, putting the food on the shelves, hardly listening as the elder rambled on about times gone by. Inside, shame and fear still roiled, making her feel almost ill.

Turning her back to the woodsman, she stood as though looking out the window, trying to slow the still-frantic pace of her heart. The pleasure, the journey to that ultimate moment of soul-destructive release, would not be denied. She must have been ensorcelled, the spell drawing her to that place, creating her wanton behaviour, the voice in her head. Yet she didn't believe in magic—not really. Surely it was just something parents made up to keep

their children in line with fear? If you don't behave, the faeries will be angered, the pixies pinch your toes at night.

Perhaps Elawen was right in saying it was time Myrina found herself another lover? Surely this unseemly reaction was a result of loneliness, of being untouched by a man's hands for all these months? But how could she have imagined, on her own, a man putting his head between her legs to kiss her quim? Not even Elawen had ever told her of such a thing. Did people actually do such things to each other?

"Does aught ail you, Myrina?"

Gottreb's querulous voice brought her out of her turbulent thoughts, and Myrina pushed them aside, drawing a shuddering breath before turning to face him. "No, Master Gottreb. I was just thinking."

"I was beginning to wonder what you were looking at." The old man paused to cough. "If perhaps faery folk were outside making faces at you through the glass."

Myrina shivered to hear him say so, so close on the heels of her own similar musings, but forced a brief laugh. "Surely you don't believe in such things, Master Gottreb?"

The old man shrugged. "I won't say I do, and I won't say I don't. Many a strange tale I've heard in the past—some beyond explaining."

"Like what?"

The old man narrowed his eyes as though thinking deeply. "Like the story of the red stag my father swore led him on a chase through the woods and then vanished in the blink of an eye. Or that of the prince who disappeared without a trace, leaving only his bow behind." Gottreb nodded, as though seeing the scepticism on her face. "There is even a place in the woods I once found, where although it were winter, the grass was green and littered with flowers. The horse I was on refused to go into it and reared before galloping away. 'Twas a beautiful glade, ringed with trees, and I was of a mind to go back, for it was so pretty. But never could I find it again, although I know these woods like the back of my hand and spent many a day searching."

Myrina wanted to ask him more about the glade, but his words robbed her of speech. Why was the thought of never being able to find that place again so heartbreaking, when she had run from it as though chased by the devil himself?

Gottreb gestured to a battered chest in the corner of the room. "Look in there for my pouch and take a shilling for the goodwife." His face was suddenly sly, and his rheumy eyes blinked rapidly. "And there might be a penny in there for you, if you would do an old man a little favour."

Feigning ignorance, Myrina went to the chest and opened it. Although the pouch lay right on top, she took some time getting it out, knowing her face was already pink with embarrassment. "I'm afraid I can't stop tonight to do any more for you, Master Gottreb. Perhaps another time."

The old man sighed, but didn't pursue the matter. "If you come another time, I will tell you the story of the missing prince." The old man's voice was eager, the words rushing one upon the other. "I'm so lonely here, and the company will do me good."

With her back still to him, Myrina took out the shilling for the goodwife and returned the pouch to the trunk. "I'll try," she said, and meant it, for then she could ask him about the glade as well. Bidding the old man goodnight, she left him and stepped out into the twilight.

All around her the night seemed to hum and sing. A full harvest moon was rising, blood red, behind the trees. Suddenly frightened for no reason other than the lingering yearning twisting in her belly, Myrina began to run. She would be safe at home with her mother, out of the woods.

Yet no matter how fast she ran, the sensation of a dangerous, uncontrollable something chasing her would not subside, but followed, snapping at her heels, the entire way home.

When Myrina pushed open the door to their cottage, her mother was dozing by the fire, head slumped to her chest, the flickering light and shadow emphasising her frailty. For a moment Myrina simply stood, letting her gaze take in every line of the beloved face, the once-strong hands now almost bird-like in their delicacy, the small lump her body made beneath the quilt.

The click of the latch as the door swung shut woke the sleeping patient, who looked up to smile at her daughter.

"Ah, you're home," whispered her mother, in a soft breathless voice. "You're later than I expected."

Myrina turned away to hang up her cloak on a peg by the door and to hide the sudden flame of her cheeks. "Goodwife Harbottle asked me to deliver the woodsman's provisions, and it took longer than I thought."

“Hmm,” was the sleepy reply. “I’m glad you stopped for a while with Gottreb. He must be lonely by himself so deep in the woods.”

Wanting to change the subject, Myrina asked, “Did you have some of the soup I left you?”

“Oh, yes. And I’ve already taken my nightly draught.”

Myrina glanced into the pot hanging over the fire and knew if her mother had eaten any, it was only a mouthful. But although words of remonstrance rose to her lips, she swallowed them back down and simply said, “That is good, Mama,” before helping her mother to ready herself for bed.

The moon had risen fully by the time Myrina climbed the ladder leading to her little attic room and was so bright she blew out her lamp and undressed by the silvery light. Clad only in her shift, she stood at the window, trying to sort through the disparate emotions—fear, disbelief, desire, shame—all churning together in her heart.

Out there, somewhere, the glade would be bathed in moonlight. The magical circle of trees stood guard. The spirit or faery who spoke in that deep, thrilling voice was there, waiting for her. How she knew that, Myrina could not say, but it was a conviction that grew and widened until the pull of his voice, his passion, was almost too strong to resist.

“No good will come of this, Myrina Traihune. Best to forget—go on as though it never happened.”

The whispered words held no weight and floated away like smoke, insubstantial and unimportant in comparison to the fire raging inside.

Prince Ryllio had learned not to count the days or measure the nights, even when he was aware of them. Time had become meaningless and, for long, blessed ages, he sank into a dream state, as though the stone encasing his body had travelled to his brain, giving it infinite slowness. Between those periods he was awoken by the Fey, became aware of and treasured each contact with the living, be it animal or bird, faery or human, although the latter were rare indeed.

Visits from the Fey were once more frequent, but had slowly dwindled. The king and queen had sometimes returned, rousing him from his stupor to watch their midnight parties in the glade, where they and their court caroused by torchlight. Sometimes, coming alone, they made love as on the first day when they caught him watching. Energetic and adventurous lovers, their couplings left him almost weeping with desire. Better, he thought at those times, for them to have killed him outright rather than torture him in

such a cruel way. His body was stone, but his emotions, his needs, remained intact, becoming painful as he watched them make love and was touched and aroused by the tenderness between them.

Golden-haired Kestor also sometimes came to see him, allowing Ryllio a few weeks or months of consciousness, but his visits, like those of the king and queen, came with less and less frequency. The Fey, Kestor once explained, were slowly retreating beyond the veil. Some would always remain in the human world, and there were portals between the two planes if you knew where to find them, but they were becoming fewer. It was only as Ryllio considered the oak on the other side of the glade had gone from sapling to towering behemoth in the time since he last saw a faery that he realised they were probably gone from this part of the human world forever.

“Good riddance,” he thought, but in his heart he knew it to be a sad thing, irrespective of the trouble they had visited on him. The thought of their magic being lost to this world was an unhappy circumstance indeed. And their company, tantalizing and frustrating as it was, was some relief from the loneliness which otherwise was complete. Growing to appreciate the birds that nested in his thicket, the foxes that sometimes denned nearby, was not the same as hearing voices, seeing others like his former self, be they human or Fey.

Living this mostly timeless existence had been the norm, until today.

Now, desperation forced the counting not of minutes but of seconds since the black-haired nymph had left the glade.

She had entered as though in a dream—a little smile tipping the edges of her full pink lips, the motion of her hands languid and graceful as she doffed her cloak. Beneath a small white cap edged with lace lay coils of midnight-dark hair, small tendrils escaping in ringlets to play around her face. Heavy-lidded eyes of sparkling blue seemed to look right at him, and a blush of rosy colour stained from throat to softly rounded cheeks.

Ryllio had felt her presence, her beauty, like the pull of a rope anchored to his soul. As she stopped before where he knelt and reached to unbutton her jacket, the pounding echo of his heart shook his stony prison and rushed in his ears.

The need to touch her, learn who she was, was so overwhelming he forgot the spell holding him in place—tried to reach for her although it was impossible. Straining, he imagined touching her face, the sensation of her peachy skin beneath his fingers. When she arched her face skyward, raising

her hands to her cheeks, her neck, Ryllio knew she could hear his thoughts, his wishes, although he knew not how.

Oh, the joy of it! The desire! Watching the innocent exploration, her sweet face tight and flushed with need and knowing she could sense all he desired made Ryllio feel alive, truly human for the first time since his punishment began.

Her small breasts were sensitive. It was obvious from the way simply touching them excited her, took her close to the apex of passion. His yearning to enhance her pleasure led him further and further until he imagined her naked beneath him, thighs open, revealing her most secret place to his avid gaze. She shuddered, her little hand creeping beneath her skirts, and he pictured himself lifting her hips, covering her delicious wet flesh with his mouth.

The sound of her release was sweet torture—the sight of her falling back, writhing among the flowers, crying out again and again, brought him to a pitch of need never felt before. As a man he had loved women, taking delight in their charms. As a lump of stone he had seen beautiful Fey, scantily or even sky-clad, watched the royal couplings and known the rush of arousal. But never had he wanted, *craved*, another as he did this woman.

Then she ran away, and Ryllio was left to grieve as he had not sorrowed since the days after Mab transformed his body into rock. Again and again he called to her, knowing she could not hear, or perhaps was too frightened to heed, but unable to stop. Each degree of the rising moon was marked, noted, added to the tally of heartbreak when she did not return. And so would it be with the sun the next day, and the next, he knew, and again with the moon or stars each lonely night for eternity.

He did not even know her name, knew not whose loss he mourned—knew only the prison he was in had never felt as all-encompassing as it did this night. And as the moon rose to tint the hollow silver, and the night breezes rustled through the leaves, over and over he whispered:

“I mean you no harm, beautiful one. Please, come back to me.”

And suddenly, as though in answer to his entreating words, she was there—and his heart almost burst with happiness.

Chapter Four

Exhausted as she had been, Myrina could not sleep. Each time she dozed, the sound of his voice roused her back to consciousness. Nothing stopped it—not the pillow over her head, a recitation of all the verses she knew, thoughts of her mother—nothing. When tossing and turning and a comingling of fear and desire rising within forced her from bed, she went to stand at her window. Lifting her flushed cheeks to the night breeze, inhaling the scent of wild sage and pine drifting through the air, she realised the voice had become even stronger, the entreaty much harder to resist.

He called her beautiful, said he meant no harm. The loneliness and longing inherent in every word tugged at her heart and filled her with yearning.

Before she could even think on it, she was downstairs, putting on her cloak and shoes. With one last look to ensure her mother slept, she slipped out the door and ran.

Gottreb said he had searched the woods for the glade, but never found it again. Myrina, who knew only the area around her own house and the path to the village, found herself drawn in an almost straight line back to the hollow. Following his voice, the inexorable pull of her fantasy, was both exhilarating and terrifying. The moonshine turned everything to a study in silver and black, deepening the shadows while making even the smallest stone stand out.

On and on she ran, feeling him grow stronger, becoming breathless as mystic desire gave wings to her feet. *Enchanted*, she thought. *I have been ensorcelled*. But the knowledge no longer had the ability to frighten. Too deep was she in the dream, in the magic. Fear and regret may have their day, but not now. The night belonged to her unknown, untouched, lover.

Suddenly she was there and felt his joy. And something deeper, stronger even than the passion reaching out to caress her in waves. Heart pounding, she stopped at the edge of the clearing, feeling the world fall away with the ease of a cloak discarded. It would be there when she returned—all the

sorrow and worry waiting—but here was a barrier it could not cross. In her secret trysting place, it had no power.

“Tell me your name, beautiful one. Tell me what to cry aloud in my passion.”

The words twisted through her, leaving sparks and plumes of heat in their wake.

“Myrina,” she whispered, moving away from the trees, toward the thicket on the other side of the glade. It seemed lighter, less tangled than it had earlier in the day, the stone in the middle of it more exposed.

“Myrina. A name worthy of such loveliness.”

The sound of those deep, passionate tones rolled into her blood, set her very bones singing. Curiosity and the ever-present desire drew her closer to his hiding place.

“Tell me yours.”

“Ryllio.”

“Ryllio,” she repeated, tasting it on her tongue, with her heart, and finding it perfect. Hearing him murmur in approval, she said it again, but slower, letting her voice convey all the secrets she did not yet have the courage to confess. “Ryllio.”

He sighed, a heartfelt sound. *“I never thought to hear my name spoken again, or knew the sound of it would make me so happy.”*

Inexplicably, Myrina felt tears sting her eyes. “Where are you, Ryllio? Why can’t I see you? Are you but a spirit?”

“Worse.” His sorrow was like a living thing, moving in her mind. *“Come closer and see.”*

At the edge of the thicket, she stopped and in the moonlight could see what she had thought a rock was in actuality a statue. A beautiful marble representation of a man, kneeling, the lower part of his body hidden in the brambles, with the face she had seen in her fantasy earlier that day.

“How can this be?” she cried, reaching out instinctively, leaning into the thicket, trying to touch the harshly handsome lines of his face.

“Be careful, there are thorns.”

Unable to span the distance between them, Myrina withdrew her hand, sorrow clogging her throat. In her mind he was alive, a creature of flesh and blood. To see him thus, cold and inert, was enough to break her heart.

“How did you come to this pass?”

For a long moment, Ryllio was silent, and Myrina thought he did not intend to answer. When he did, regret weighed heavy in his tone.

“I came upon the king and queen of the Fey while they indulged in love-play. I knew I should not watch, should leave them to their privacy, but I did not. Instead I stayed and spied upon them in their most intimate moments, and in their anger and disgust they condemned me to this fate.”

“Oh, how cruel!” cried Myrina, aghast at so horrible a punishment for the crime committed.

But Ryllio’s voice sounded only resigned. *“Cruel, perhaps, but to them also just.”*

Myrina studied the marble face, seeing in it a hint of arrogance, a touch of stubbornness in the firm lines of jaw and mouth. “It was not right, what you did, but I cannot agree the punishment was just.”

“It is done,” was his only reply.

Pulling her cloak into place beneath her, Myrina sank onto the grass, tucking her legs under, not taking her gaze from his face. “How long have you been here?”

His sigh echoed through her mind like the cry of a mourning dove. *“A very long time—from the days when Paltheius ruled.”*

Try as she might, Myrina could not remember an emperor by that name, for history was never a favourite subject of hers at school, and this she confessed to Ryllio.

“No matter,” he replied, *“for it is all in the past. I am interested only in the now, here, with you. What benevolent trick of fate brought you to me?”*

Heat rushed through Myrina’s body at the question, and she knew, even in moonlight, her blushes would be noticeable. Squirming slightly, she looked down at her hands where they lay on her lap and considered how to answer. Ryllio, she thought, had been honest with her, and she wanted to be the same with him, so in a low, halting voice she relayed her conversation with Elawen, and her friend’s advice. But she did not confess her thoughts on being ensorcelled and led to his grove for fear of hurting his feelings. Perhaps she had been enchanted at first, she reasoned, but the return to him now was her own doing.

For a long time Ryllio said nothing, and Myrina began to wonder if he thought less of her, but his next words were reassuring.

“I can’t help thinking your friend was only partly right.”

“In what way?” Myrina asked in surprise.

“There are some things you can learn on your own, but others only a lover can teach.”

“What kinds of things?”

Ryllio’s voice grew low, caressing. *“The touch of your own hands is unlike the touch of another. What you do to yourself cannot feel the same or give the same sensations as when a lover gives you pleasure.”*

Myrina shivered, her skin prickling to life, body growing warm and liquid inside. Words failed her, for she remembered the imagined ecstasy of his mouth on her quim, wondered if it could have been even better in reality.

“And,” he continued in the same low, seductive tone, *“each lover is different, is inspired to do different things, or the same loving actions in different ways. It is only in the moment you can know whether these new sensations are pleasurable or not. But Elawen also was right. There can be no harm in learning your body’s desires for yourself.”*

Flushed with arousal, yet also embarrassed, Myrina thought it best to leave, but could not bring herself to go. It was not just the desire holding her in place, but a bone-deep reluctance to abandon Ryllio now that she knew of his lonely existence. There could be no harm in staying for a while, in being with him during this moonlit night, in asking him some of the questions burning in her mind.

It took some courage, however, to finally reply, and her voice faltered from her throat. “Are lovers so different, one from the other, then?”

“Yes, and you will be different with each one too. What one man will do to you without hesitation, another would never consider doing. And what you enjoy with one man, you will find repulsive if another tried.”

Considering his words, Myrina realised he must have had many lovers before his punishment began, and a spark of something akin to jealousy came to life deep in her belly. It made her voice stronger, with a bit of a snap, when she spoke. “What kinds of things would a lover such as yourself never do? Surely there cannot be many?”

But when he replied, his words doused the flame of her anger, even as they ignited a flash-fire of passion.

“For you, with you, I would do everything, give you every liberty over my body, take whichever you would give in return. There is nothing I wouldn’t try in my quest to give you pleasure, to satisfy you, to make your desire burn so hot it incinerates us both with the ecstasy of our joining.”

There was no need to ask what he meant, for in her mind she saw them together, in flickers of images conjured by his imagination. He was bent to her breasts, lips curved to receive her straining nipple—kissing her back, hands stroking her belly—kneeling between her legs, his hair dark against her thighs—curled around her from behind, the head of his cock poised for entry into her hungry body. She was tied, naked, to a bed—then he was likewise held immobilized for her pleasure. He was behind, in front, between—in her quim, her mouth, her hand, her arse. She was over, under, beside him, her hair unbound, trailing over his skin. Gentle here, masterful there—in control and ceding control—kissing, stroking, licking, sucking places Myrina never thought another would touch.

She pressed trembling palms to her cheeks, trying to rise, wanting to flee, but finding her legs too weak. The images were so real they left her gasping, burning—titillated and confused.

“I’ve shocked and frightened you.” His voice was rueful, but filled with such harsh longing the desire rampaging through her body climbed even higher. *“I’m sorry. You are more innocent than I realised. Please—”* he added, as Myrina once more tried to rise, *“—don’t go.”*

She subsided, quivering, drawing her cloak closer around her as though it could protect her from the unfamiliar swirl of emotion between them. His words and images were like an iron chain, binding and drawing her further into an unknown world she desperately longed to explore.

But there was also a sense of shame for being so ignorant. Jecil had been her only lover, coaxing until curiosity and the knowledge he would soon be leaving convinced her to accept his attentions. She had been tired of hearing Elawen’s stories and not having any of her own to share. Tired too of not knowing what it felt like to be held, caressed, loved. Now she realised she was still almost as naive as before Jecil breached her maidenhead.

“You think me silly—like the old biddy Elawen accuses me of being.”

“No, Myrina.” Sincerity gave his words a gentle edge. *“Your inexperience is not something to be scorned.”*

“How can you say that when I could hardly understand what you showed me?” Tears prickled behind her eyes, and she hugged her knees beneath her cloak. *“When I can hardly understand what I am feeling?”*

“What do you feel?”

How could she describe the heated sensitivity of her body, the need washing through her in rough, tempestuous waves? How to explain to

Ryllio just the sound of his voice, the vision of his fantasies, had ignited a passionate conflagration within? In its light all other sensation dimmed, cast into insignificance.

Gently, as mist creeps over the warmth of a slow flowing river, he cast a picture into her mind. Holding her cheeks, he tipped her face up so the deep green eyes with their slumberous lids and amorous gleam looked deep into hers.

“*So lovely,*” he murmured, fingers tracing the lines of her brows, the curve of her lips. “*So beautiful.*”

The feathery sensations came from her own hands, but still Myrina allowed the love-dream to pull her deep, gladly sinking into the drowning pleasure, leaving reality behind. Ryllio’s voice, tender and enthralling, guided her to discard constraint along with her cloak, inhibition with her shift.

Loosening her hair to toss the heavy mass behind her shoulders, Myrina combed fingers through it as she raised her face to the star-flung sky. The movement lifted her breasts—an offering made to love’s primacy—and the puckered tips, kissed by moonlight and the warm night air, ached. At Ryllio’s sighing moan, the last of vestiges of reserve fell away, and she felt reborn—a woman desired and desiring, confident of her allure.

Taking her time, Myrina stroked neck and breasts, belly and thighs—making contact with fluttering touches and sure, strong caresses. Ryllio’s whispers entreated her to search out and delight in the softness and sensitivity of her skin, the supple firmness of the muscles beneath.

She felt like a wild thing, unfettered by rules and expectations, open only to the satisfaction of the moment. In the cradle of the night, Ryllio’s voice enfolded her, sheltering and freeing all at once.

Bending her knees, Myrina let her hands drift toward her quim and then away, closer and closer each time, feeling need spiral up and up, threatening to sweep all before it. Holding it at bay a little longer intensified the sweet, torturous yearning. There was a desperate tone to Ryllio’s voice, the words all but unintelligible, a jumble of sighs and pleas and praise. Surrendering, Myrina finally touched the outer lips, discovering the silken texture, softness and heat. Slowly, teasingly, she slipped her fingers deeper, into the most intimate core, creating a shudder of erotic pleasure. As she explored the torturous climb to bliss, the incipient release bowed her body back, back.

“Now, Myrina, now!”

The shock of his hoarse command took her fingers, unerringly, to the point where all sensation centered, and the first circling rub made her cry aloud in relief. A blinding wave of ecstasy took her body beyond control, made it writhe and shake, hips jerking to wring every joy from the sublime moment.

Shattered, she stared up at the sky, entwined by the scent of wildflowers and pine, air rasping from her throat, the sound mingling with Ryllio’s rough breathing. A puff of breeze rushed over her body, chilling against the overheated, sweat-dampened skin. Suddenly her nakedness no longer felt as natural as it had only moments before, and she gathered up her shift, tugging it over her head with shaking hands.

Reaching for her cloak, afire now with embarrassment rather than passion, Myrina wished only to run away. Fear clawed its way into her heart, for she was adrift, lost in world beyond her understanding.

With a whisper, Ryllio stilled her flight.

“Stay, Myrina. Stay, just a little longer.”

Chapter Five

She was now quite sure she was enchanted.

Each day Myrina awoke and swore she would stray no more into the woods to visit the stone statue. Yet every night, as soon as she was sure her mother slept, Ryllio's call became irresistible, and she would run through the forest to him. Once there, all inhibitions fell away, and she sank into a desire-born dream which lasted almost until the rising of the sun.

If it were only physical abandon found in the hollow, perhaps she could have stayed away, but there Myrina discovered more than just the true meaning of desire.

Ryllio fascinated her in a way she had no way of defining. Wrapped in the warmth and tenderness of his voice, she would drowse in the afterglow of passion as they shared thoughts and dreams and stories.

He spoke of his time in the woods, of the faeries who had sometimes come to the glade, but came no more. Told her of the king and queen of the Fey and Kestor, who loved nothing better than to spy upon the royal couple. When she asked about his life before, he was reticent, as though unwilling to share that part of his past, speaking only of his love for his parents, his sorrow at not being a better son. If she pressed him, asked questions of that life, Ryllio used the strange connection between them to divert her.

And she was pitifully easy to distract. Entering her mind with increasing ease, he guided her to heights of ecstasy, filling her imagination with hitherto unimaginable passion. Yet each successive encounter left Myrina a little less fulfilled, a little more dissatisfied. And her need to know more and more about him grew.

Wearily making her way home in the cold of the pre-dawn damp, sore and exhausted, she would once more swear not to return, even then knowing she was playing herself false.

The weather turned autumn blustery, grey and damp, suiting Myrina's mood implicitly. The clouds seemed almost to brush the tops of the trees, and the leaves, now gold and red and brown, blew from the branches to spin and caper across the ground. Soon, when the weather got colder, she would

be unable to reach Ryllio, and the knowledge twisted into her heart like a blade.

There were other pressing concerns. As the days passed Myrina realised her mother's mind was beginning to wander. Oft-times her wit was as sharp as ever, then suddenly, between one moment and the next, she would ask the whereabouts of her husband, or call for others also long gone.

It was now only a matter of time, Myrina realised, before the end would be upon them, and she treasured each moment they had together. Yet still she thought of Ryllio, worried for him, longed for him, even as she berated herself for a fool. There could be no future with a marble statue, no matter how he made her feel. No matter that she now knew no living man could match him in her heart.

"What ails you, daughter?"

Myrina turned from the window to look at her mother and forced a smile. "Nothing at all, Mama. Why do you ask?"

A gentle smile tugged at her mother's lips as the older woman shook her head. "I know you worry about me—I can see it in your eyes when you think I am not looking—but there is something else too." Holding out her hand, she beckoned her daughter close. "We may not have much more time together here. Won't you tell me what it is that plagues you so?"

How Myrina's heart was wrung with renewed agony to hear her mother say out loud what she most feared to be true, and she could not stop tears from filling her eyes.

With a little sob, she rushed to kneel and rest her head on the frail lap, just as she had when some childish injury had caused her hurt and she sought succour.

And as her mother's hand caressed her hair, Myrina wished with all her heart she could share her woe, but of course she could not. The desire she felt for Ryllio, her enchantment with a man turned to stone, was not something she would ever think to speak of. To the woman who gave her life least of all.

As though understanding her reticence, her mother simply held her and crooned timeless words of comfort.

Indeed, the story was not one she could share with anyone, not even Elawen who, knowing something was wrong, tried to press Myrina into confiding. Letting her friend believe it was worry for her mother was the easiest way out of the tangle without lying.

As though all that were not enough, one afternoon, walking down to the village to deliver some squash from her garden to Mistress Hennesey, Goodwife Harbottle's sister, Myrina was surprised to see a familiar figure striding jauntily toward her.

"Jecil!"

Delighted to see him, she laughed as he picked her up and swung her around, planting a loud kiss on her cheek as he did. But when he tried to kiss her lips, she turned her head away. Jecil only laughed as he set her down and tugged at his military jacket, setting it back to rights.

"Still the shy maid, I see." He lifted his brows, brown eyes twinkling, "But surely not still with me?"

Myrina knew her cheeks were red, but could do nothing to halt the telltale blush. Before she could find an answer, Jecil gave her a cocky grin. "Still blushing too! I'm glad to see nothing has changed since I left."

And as though indeed nothing had changed, he threw his arm about her shoulder and started walking—talking so much of his time in the city she never had need to answer.

Already his commanding officer had recommended him for promotion. He had come back to Kessit only to sell the land his father had given him before being sent to his next posting.

"And," he said with a sly sideways glance at Myrina, "to see old friends."

Myrina looked away, uncomfortable with the way he held her close to his side. "I'm glad to see you, Jecil, and looking so well."

Clad in a smart red-and-blue uniform, his long blond hair pulled into a tidy club at the back of his head and tied with a ribbon of the imperial colours, he was a fine sight indeed, but one that left her unmoved. Myrina felt a sinking in her belly as his arm tightened around her shoulders.

"I'm glad you think so, sweetheart, for I have missed you sorely while I was away. Will you take pity on me while I am here?"

There was no mistaking the meaning behind his crooning words. Myrina stopped walking and pulled back from his embrace. She had no wish to hurt his feelings, but could not even contemplate renewing their affair, however briefly. Just the thought felt like a betrayal of Ryllio.

"I'm sorry, Jecil, but I can't be any more to you now than a friend."

Jecil shook his head, amusement alight in his face. "You wound me, darling, to say that is all we are! Let me come to your house tonight and we

will slip away together as we used to. There can be no harm in our enjoying this time we have, although it is so little.”

“No!” At Jecil’s look of surprise, Myrina took a deep breath, forcing her tone back to normal. “No thank you. It wouldn’t be right.”

The change in his expression was gradual, moving from humour to disbelief, and then to narrow-eyed malice. “There is no need to play the coy maid with me. Perhaps the rest of the village will still view you that way, but we know the truth. And if you’re refusing me, I’ll wager at least one other person does too.”

Shocked by the naked venom in his voice, Myrina gasped. “What do you mean by that?”

Mouth downturned in a petulant frown, Jecil crossed his arms. “If you’re no longer interested in me, then you must have found someone else. I pity him, whoever he may be, for you know nothing about pleasing a man.”

Stung and angry, she turned and began walking away, ignoring him when he called after her, not even looking at him when he fell into pace beside her and begged her forgiveness. By the time they neared the village square, Jecil had fallen into sulky silence. Elawen waved at Myrina and crossed the crowded street to join them.

“I heard you were back, Jecil Conrow.” Elawen’s shrewd gaze travelled back and forth between their faces, and she grinned. “And still strutting around like cock-o-the-walk. At least now your feathers are a little finer.”

“Shrew,” Jecil snarled. “Can’t you think of anything better to do with that cheeky mouth of yours than make fun of one of the emperor’s men?”

Elawen’s grin grew wider as she slipped an arm through Myrina’s. Letting her eyelids droop, she licked her lips and hummed deep in her throat. “I’ve been told my mouth is one of my best features, for I use it with such skill. That’s something you’ll never know for sure, and you’re the poorer for it.”

“And you’re the poorer for not getting a chance to prove your talent,” Jecil replied with a smirk, drawing a screech of outrage from Elawen. They began to argue so vociferously that Myrina was able to slip away to deliver her squash without them even noticing.

After spending quite some time with Mistress Hennesey, Myrina cut through the fields toward the Harbottle farm, hoping to find Elawen returned from the village. At least in her friend’s company, Myrina could

find a smile or laugh—forget for a while the strange conundrum she found herself in.

A cool gusty wind by turns swirled in her face and pushed her along. The ground was rough with grain stubble and already hard, although they were yet to have autumn's first frost. Grey, sere, the landscape provided a true reflection of Myrina's mood. Hither and yon, cold and fickle as the wind, blew her melancholy thoughts.

Jecil was right, of course—she really knew nothing about how to bring pleasure to a lover. Ryllio had shown her how to find it for herself, giving her visions of what a man could do to please her, but she still didn't know how to satisfy a man in return. It made her feel sad and less of a woman than she should be.

Yet Ryllio was more of a lover to her than Jecil had ever been. Even though she had never felt his hands upon her skin, nor been able to touch him in return, she knew him in a deeply intimate way. Could the giving of her body to another man ever be more personal, or more intensely arousing, than allowing Ryllio into her mind, sharing his passionate visions? Surely she would never find another man to entice her as he did.

That thought brought her spirits even lower, for how could Ryllio, cast into stone, unable to share anything but thoughts, ever truly satisfy a flesh-and-blood woman? Yet if Ryllio were, somehow, to return to life, how quickly he would tire of her company!

One night, lost in the rapture of being with him, she had wished aloud for his release from Mab's spell. For a long time he was silent, leaving her to wonder what he was thinking, and eventually only sighed and spoke of other things.

Although free to come and go as she pleased, Myrina felt equally imprisoned. The enchantment of being with Ryllio never seemed to completely fade, but bliss turned to melancholy whenever they were apart. How she longed to find a way to release him. Even if it meant he would eventually leave her, she would gladly suffer that pain to know he was once more at liberty.

Pausing in the field, Myrina experienced a wave of sorrow and loneliness so acute that tears sprang to her eyes. As though in response, there was a moment of calm—the wind dying away to just a soft ruffle—and borne on the silence, she heard him, felt him reach for her.

Needing Ryllio's comfort and tenderness, Myrina turned across the field and into the woods and did not stop running until she stood, panting, before the tangle of bracken.

Immediately the sensation of being in his arms surrounded her with joy and yearning, and she fell to her knees, looking into his beautiful face across the space separating them. Tremors racked her body, and the sound of Ryllio's harsh breathing echoed in her head.

"I needed you, and you came."

His happiness was a balm to her soul, and Myrina smiled as she slowly stripped away the concealing layers of clothing.

"I needed you too. So very much."

Her words seemed to release something within him, and a rush of images akin to a storm broke over her, ravishing her senses. In moments Myrina was crying out, reaching for the culmination he commanded—demanded—of her.

When the storm passed, she lay back, satisfied for the moment, although a small seed of discontent unfurled in her heart. How she wished she could give him the same pleasure she had received. How it hurt her so to know he could but watch her find ecstasy, when what she wished for was to be in his arms.

As though he'd heard her thoughts, his voice drifted into her half-slumbering state:

"How happy you make me, darling, with the unselfish sharing of your delight."

"But is it enough?"

It was only a whisper, but he heard it and replied: *"What I truly desire cannot be, so yes, this is enough."*

She would give him more, she decided, so he would always hold the memory of her passion as a gift. Where before he had shown her all he would do with her if he could, she would cast her shyness aside and tell him how he made her feel.

Cupping her breasts, pushing them together, she pinched and twisted the over-sensitive nipples and sighed. "Oh, Ryllio. How I long to know the touch of your lips, here, everywhere."

The sound that echoed through her mind was beyond description, dark and raw, overwhelming in its masculine desire. It spurred Myrina on, inspiring her to lift one full breast so as to touch it with the tip of her

tongue. “I would hold the back of your head, my fingers tangled in your hair to embrace you closer, tighter, while I twined my legs around yours, felt the hardness of your cock against my body.”

Ryllio made no reply, but immediately an image of what she described took shape—a confluence of his mind, and hers. It was so intense, so *real*, Myrina almost imagined the roughness of his legs beneath the soles of her feet, the softness of his hair entwined around her fingers.

“I want you,” she breathed, feeling the air catch in her throat. “Inside me. But not like this.”

Rolling onto her stomach, she thrust her buttocks in the air, reaching between her legs to press trembling fingers into her desire-slick quim. Knowing he could see her clearly in the sunlight only pushed her arousal higher. Exposed to him, she pressed one burning cheek into her cloak, feeling elation burst through her at his agonized cry of delight. Slowly she withdrew her fingers, pressed them back in, feeling the hot sheath tighten and release in waves.

“Oh,” she cried, seeing it, feeling his hands tight against her hips, the thrust of his cock sliding hard and hot into her slick flesh. “Yes. Faster. Harder.”

As though Ryllio felt each plunging incursion into her body, his low groans matched the tempo of her hand. Rocking her palm against the sensitive peak of flesh, feeling it harden as her release coalesced, drew tighter, closer, she cried, “Does this please you? Can you feel your cock inside me—the wetness, the desire?”

“Yes,” he cried, just as she shattered beneath the weight of their love play, and their voices rang out together as though they found release as one.

Chapter Six

Leaving Ryllio was harder than ever, and Myrina exited the cool quiet of the woods and started up the path to home with dragging, guilt-laden, steps. With the sun almost setting, it was an hour or more past time for her to be back. Mama would be waiting, perhaps worried about her delayed arrival. The yearning to be with Ryllio pulled against her need to care for her ailing mother, becoming a constant tug-of-war in her heart.

After her father's death, Myrina hadn't truly understood her mother's inability to find interest in anything or anyone around her. There had even been moments when her mother's distracted, distant air had stirred her to anger, making her feel she had lost both parents instead of just one. Now she understood better, as she left part of herself behind in the magical glade. The love she had for her mother was as true and strong as it had ever been, but not strong enough to overcome the pain of parting from Ryllio. Once more she wondered what she could do to free him, who she could ask for advice.

As she approached the cottage, a figure stepped out from alongside it, and Myrina stopped, squinting against the sun to see. It was Jecil, and he came forward, smiling, to meet her in the yard.

Still stung by his earlier hurtful remarks, too weary to be polite, she asked, "What do you want?"

Smile fading, he stopped an arm's length away. "I came to talk to you, to ask why you treated me the way you did today, to ask for another chance."

Lifting her hands and letting them fall again, Myrina shook her head. "You have a new life now, and so do I. There is no use in speaking further of this."

Stepping closer so she was forced to tilt her head back to see his face, he scowled. "I want to speak of it, to know who it is you found to take my place."

A wave of annoyance swept through her at his petulant tone, and she replied, "Whatever place you had in my life was forfeit when you left Kessit. I never asked you to stay—never expected it—nor did I ask to go

with you. What makes you think I was waiting here, hoping you would come back, ready to throw myself at you for the sake of a few days' pleasure?"

His fair skin flushing with anger, Jecil grabbed her arm, pulled her close against his chest. "I thought you were different, but you're no better than the other whores in the village, lifting their skirts for whichever man takes their fancy."

"You only say that because I won't lift my skirt for you again," she cried, struggling against the cruel grip of his fingers.

"No," he replied, lips pulled back in something akin to a snarl. "I say that because I can smell him on you, whoever it is you've been swiving in the woods. Is he married? Is that why no one in the village knows who he is?"

"What I do is my business, not yours. I don't want you anymore."

Anger forced the words from her mouth just as, with a rough shove, Jecil sent her staggering away, causing her to fall to her knees.

"I wouldn't have you at any price," he sneered, and Myrina wondered why she had ever thought him handsome. With his face mottled with anger, his lips thinned back over his teeth, he was frightening. "I don't take any man's leavings."

To her relief, he turned away and strode off along the path without a backward glance. As she rose and brushed at her skirt, rubbed her stinging knees, the sense of despair collecting around her heart deepened.

That night she told Ryllio of Jecil's return and what he said. Ryllio's fury was both shocking and gratifying.

"He's a fool and a knave. If I could, I would beat him to within an inch of his life, not only for his folly, but for making you doubt yourself in even the tiniest way. You are everything any man could ever desire."

Not even his words of praise and continued joy each night she went to him could dispel the weight of her fears and sorrows, which seemed to grow more overwhelming each passing day. Thoughts of how to undo the spell holding Ryllio captive beat a constant refrain in her mind until she thought she would truly go insane. But what did she know of magic, or the Fey? Didn't the stories say even if you could find them, they always demanded more than you could pay for any boon?

Yet there must, she decided, be a way, if only she knew how to be about it.

“I’ll take Gottreb’s provisions for him this evening, Goodwife Harbottle.”

Elawen made a face at her behind her mother’s back, but Myrina was too tired and heart-sore to laugh as she usually did. She wanted to ask the old man about the glade, what he had seen there, or felt. Perhaps in his tale she could find a clue to help her, to help Ryllio.

“That is kind of you, Myrina. There’s work going a-begging around here, and I can use Elawen’s help this afternoon.”

Myrina forced herself to keep walking past the faint track leading to the hollow, although the pull of Ryllio’s presence was so strong it made her tremble. Greeting the woodsman and unpacking the goods from her basket took little time, and all the while he chattered to her, asking for her mother and the other villagers he no longer saw.

Gottreb paused to cough and, before he could start talking again, Myrina suddenly found herself asking, “Does the name Ryllio mean aught to you, Master Gottreb?”

“Ryllio, Ryllio...” The old man screwed his eyes tight shut and sucked on his lip in concentration. “Why do I recall that name?”

Afire with impatience, Myrina leaned back against the washstand and waited for the woodsman to speak again. Suddenly Gottreb’s eyes popped open and he nodded, slapping his hand against the table.

“Of course,” he cried, then was forced to pause as another coughing fit shook his thin frame. Once he regained his composure, helped by a sip of ale, he finally continued. “It was a tale told me by my mother, oh, many, many years ago, concerning a prince of that name. Even then it was an old story, so not many would remember it now.”

Myrina gripped the counter behind her as tightly as she could to stop herself dancing with irritation. “Would you tell me the tale before I go, Master Gottreb, please?”

The lonely old man was only too willing to comply.

“Once upon a time, all of this land and the land up the mountains beyond, stretching even to the sea beyond that, belonged to a mighty king. And he ruled with great wisdom and fairness and was beloved by all his subjects. The kingdom was prosperous, and the king was well-pleased, but most pleasing of all to him was his son and heir, Prince Ryllio. There was none more handsome, charming or strong than the prince, and everyone

who met him agreed the Faeries must have blessed him at birth. For everything he did was done to perfection.

“Then one day, in his twenty-fifth summer, Prince Ryllio left the castle to hunt and disappeared. Everyone in the kingdom came out to search for him—the trackers and huntsmen scoured the forests and fields, the fishermen traversed the streams, rivers and sea, even the children joined in. The only sign they ever found was the prince’s bow, lying abandoned in the deepest forest, beside a wild copse. Thinking perhaps he had been hurt and had somehow crawled into the tangle for shelter, the courtiers hacked at the briars and brambles with their swords, but could not force their way in. Thus they realised the prince couldn’t be there and they continued with the search.

“For many months, day and night, they looked, but found no further clue to where he may have gone. His mother the queen died soon after from a broken heart, and his father spent so much time and gold searching for his son that when the emperor rose to power in the north—that would be the great-great-grandfather or such of the present emperor—the king was unable to hold his land against him. Thus the king disappeared, perhaps into the emperor’s dungeon, and his castle and the town around it fell to ruins.”

Gottreb paused to sip his ale, breathless after his long speech, and Myrina turned away toward the small window at her back, quite sure her face was as white as a sheet with fright. Ryllio, a prince, and trapped in the stone for longer than she could ever have imagined! How her heart ached for him, for his parents so long dead.

“Did your mother say what she thought happened to the prince?”

Myrina’s voice came out as a whisper, making Gottreb’s reply seemed overly loud in contrast.

“Some said one so handsome, so talented, had attracted the attention of the Fey, and they had stolen him away under an enchantment to their faery land.”

Did Ryllio know his parents’ fate and the fate of the kingdom that should have been his? He never asked if she found out how long he had been in the stone, as if he did not want to know the answer. What would she say if he did ask?

Too well did she know the pain of loss, having buried her father not three years past and still facing the loss of her darling mother. Yet she knew herself to be strangely blessed in comparison to Ryllio. At least she had

been there with her father to the end and was able to take care of her mother too. Those moments, so precious, when you found yourself giving love and comfort to one you hold dear, had been snatched away from the prince.

How desperate must his hurt be? How must he pine for just one minute more with his parents.

Feeling tears welling behind her eyes, Myrina quickly thanked the woodsman for the tale and collected the goodwife's shilling, chattering as hard as she could to avoid him asking to see her breasts. Gottreb looked disappointed, but made no demur when she said she had to get back to her mother, and Myrina slipped out the door as quickly as she could.

The need to go to Ryllio, to fight through the tangle of bracken keeping them physically apart, was stronger than she had ever felt before. Heart pounding, she tried to pretend she should not let it matter. Once more she reminded herself that a man of stone could not truly satisfy the needs of a flesh-and-blood woman any more than she was fit to keep company with a prince.

Hesitating outside Gottreb's cottage, Myrina balanced on the balls of her feet, once more waging war between her responsibility to her mother, and her desire to be with Ryllio.

With a sob, she acknowledged the prince would be there later, while her mother needed her far more, and she ran down the path toward home.

Each night Myrina came to him and broke through a little more of the shell Ryllio hadn't even realised existed around his heart.

As a man, he had been selfish, unable to take other's wishes into true consideration. Looking back on his life before the day of Mab's punishment brought a wave of regret, of repentance. All he had cared about were his own needs and desires. His mother's fears, father's concerns, meant nothing. As Prince Ryllio, he felt himself beyond the usual rules others lived by—if there was something he wanted, he took it, without fear or qualms.

He couldn't bring himself to speak of those times with Myrina. As she told him of her life, the passing of her father, Jecil's leaving and her mother's slow decline toward death, his admiration for her grew to immense proportions. It shamed him, her unselfish love for others—made him even more aware of his own shortcomings and the fact he was taking advantage of Myrina in a most dishonourable way.

Long had he ceased to believe in Kestor's incantation. As time passed and he felt no lessening in Mab's spell, he discounted the golden faery's words. This cold mass of stone was all he would ever be, all he deserved to be.

What then had he to offer Myrina? Even as a man, fully fleshed, he knew himself to be unworthy of her love should she chance to offer it. What had he ever done but take? If given the chance he would try, with everything he was, to be worthy of her, but as nothing but a lump of rock, he had nothing at all to give. She deserved to spend her passion with a true man, one who could hold her, touch her body not just her mind. With such a man she could have a life beyond the forest, the adventure she desired, children...

The thought of Myrina, round and happy, bearing another man's child, was so painful Ryllio thought he might die, but he held on to the anguish, trying to find strength, more convinced than ever of the need to let her go. Yes, she found pleasure in his company, but Ryllio knew the goodness of her heart. What truly brought her back, night after night, was not just the passion, but sympathy. Craven as he was, desperate as he was for even a moment of her time, he loved her too much to allow these trysts to continue.

Autumn was swiftly moving toward winter, the days growing shorter, cooler. Once, when the Faeries came often to frolic in the glade, it had always been springtime. The winter snows stopped at the edge of the trees, held at bay by their spells. Now they had ceased to visit, the enchantment seemed no more to work, and Ryllio saw the changing of the grass from green to brown and the dying of the flowers as an omen.

Perhaps without their magic the elements would begin to wear his stone away, reducing him to naught but dust over time.

And soon the journey through the woods would become all but impossible. Even on a day like today, so grey and drear, he worried about Myrina's health as she came to him through the misty damp. Tonight, he would tell her not to return, would make her promise to stay away, no matter what it took to do so.

As though mocking his resolution, the clouds passed and the sun came out to light the final hours of the day, bringing the illusion of springtime and hope.

Chapter Seven

The moon was waning, but Myrina ran, sure-footed, through the darkened woods. Each footfall seemed to echo, as though another person or spirit kept pace behind her, and such was her mood she was glad of that phantom company. Events of the day had left her feeling confused, alone.

Her mother's health was in an ever swifter decline, and Gottreb's story naming Ryllio the prince who disappeared by turns made her angry and sad, bringing forth a sense of betrayal. It shouldn't matter that Ryllio chose not to tell her who he was, but it did. Irrespective of the fact he was a prince without a throne, an immobile statue, withholding such an important piece of information made Myrina feel very lowly indeed.

Now, the time spent asking her questions seemed almost mockery on his part. There was nothing special about what she had done or seen. She had no stories of grand events or travels to share. Had he laughed to hear the mundane details of her life, to realise she, a villager of no account or address, was falling in love with a prince?

Yet fall in love she had, and even with these thoughts churning within, Myrina could no more resist his lure than become one of the Fey. Laugh at her he might, but she would be by his side as often and as much as she could. The thought of him, alone, lonely except for the company of birds and beasts, was too much to bear. And the thought of being without him was so painful she refused to even contemplate it.

The overcast day had turned to a beautiful night. Stars danced in the velvet-dark sky, the moon hovering near the tops of the trees. A light wind carried with it the sharp tang of pine, a touch of wood smoke and the first premonition of icy days to come. Already the last of the crops had been gathered, and the villagers made ready for winter. Goodwife Harbottle had suggested Myrina and her mother move to the Harbottle farm, which was closer to the village and would afford Myrina some help as her mother's health failed. It was a goodhearted suggestion, and a sensible one as well, but Myrina hadn't said yes as she knew she should.

It was too far from the glade where Ryllio lay entrapped.

Closer now to that place, his presence became so strong Myrina's heart leapt. She couldn't explain it, this instant sense of coming home, of stepping into herself in a new, exciting way each time he was near. Perhaps that was why she loved him—not because of the pleasure he guided her to and led her through, but for the way he made her feel about the person she was. Even now, unsure of his motives, certain of the futility of her love, as she stepped out of the trees it was with a straight back, a firm step and smile on her lips. Entering the glade always made her want to dance, to sing.

“*Myrina.*” His voice sounded strange, distant. “*I didn't expect you on a night such as this.*”

Undeterred, she stepped closer until the bracken brushed the front of her cloak. “Why do you say that? It is a beautiful night.”

“*But getting colder. Soon the snow will make it impossible for you to come.*”

He spoke as though whether she came or not made no difference to him, and Myrina's heart faltered.

“I can manage. A little snow will not stop me.”

For a long time only the rustle of wind broke the silence, and Myrina found her fingers gripping the edges of her cloak so tightly it was almost surprising the wool did not tear.

“*There is no need for you to brave the elements for me. Promise me you will not.*”

Kind enough words, but said in a voice edged with ice, sharp enough to slice through her heart. Speaking slowly, trying to keep each word even and clear, she asked, “Are you telling me not to return?”

“*There is no need for you to do so,*” he said again. “*I am never awake for long, and soon Mab's spell will cast me once more into slumber. The time we share must come to an end, and when better than in the season when the earth dies away beneath the snow? Come spring you can look for a lover, since you have learned all I can show you.*”

It struck like a blow, and Myrina stepped back, lifting her hands to cover what felt like a gaping wound in her chest. The urge to run away was overwhelming, but pride and spark of anger kept her in place.

When she finally found her voice, had mastered it into submission, she replied, “Am I dismissed so easily then?”

“*It is not a dismissal, Myrina.*” There was something new in his tone, although it sounded almost the same. “*Just a matter of being sensible.*”

“Sensible?” She had never felt less inclined to wisdom in her life. How could he turn her away after all they had shared, all they had felt? “Have you no feelings for me at all?”

The sound he made held nothing but sinister amusement and desire, hard and cruelty-touched. “*Do you mean will I miss doing this?*”

Without warning he was there, a vision behind her eyes—darkly handsome, subtly mocking, kneeling before her on the grass, his face upturned to watch hers as his hands slid beneath her cloak and shift.

No, she tried to say, but already her traitorous body had betrayed her, flowering open, wet and ready. It was just a fantasy, an illusion, but in her heart she knew it was more real than anything felt beyond this wooded glade. Knowing it could be the last time they shared this strange, intimate connection, she would not gainsay him, even as her heart broke asunder within.

Could she feel him trembling? Ryllio wondered, unable to stop himself from taking this one last journey into desire with her. Myrina’s pain as he told her not to come back was a palpable thing, and he knew if he let himself relent he would cast aside his resolution, beg her not to leave. Easier to make her believe his interest was built purely on lust, for next to having her for eternity, being once more a part of her passion was his greatest wish.

It took all his concentration not to bend forward in his fantasy, rest his cheek against the soft curve of her stomach, encircle her with his arms and hold her as close as he could. Instead he traced the warm quivering lines of her legs, teasing his fingers over the satiny flesh. Fantasy overlaid reality, and he could see Myrina’s hands following the path of his dream hands with her own. As he lifted the edge of her shift, she did the same, revealing knees and thighs and belly, pearlescent in the moonlight.

Ryllio could not hold back his moan of yearning, borne on a rush of passion so all-encompassing his heart felt close to bursting. No matter how many times they came together in this magical fashion, each time it felt new, wilder, stronger. The slip of her skin beneath his palms, the enticing musk of her excitement, were as real as the stony prison holding him fast.

Dipping his head, he parted her softly with his tongue, circling the hardened clitoris, dipping lower to touch and explore the slick, plump interior, drink deep of her most intimate essence.

She was quivering, sighing, hips pushing forward in demand, hands gripping his head, holding him tight to the juncture of her thighs.

His excitement rose with hers—but the need to give her pleasure was the only thing that mattered. Committed to bringing her to release, Ryllio flicked his tongue higher, curled it around the sensitive peak.

“No.”

Both in his fantasy and in reality, Myrina stepped away, breaking the connection between them. Surprised and then heartbroken, Ryllio retreated, waiting for her anger or for her to leave.

Instead she murmured, “Like this.”

An image pushed into his mind and, for a moment, disoriented, Ryllio didn’t understand. Never before had the fantasy flowed from Myrina to him, but somehow, incredibly, this time it was. Gasping, feeling desire incinerate all but instinct, Ryllio grasped her thighs where they straddled his head and pulled her down to his seeking mouth.

Now, swirling visions and reality overlapped, expanded, wavered in the intensity of their heated coupling. Ryllio could see her standing in the hollow before him, shift held up on one arm, her hand recreating the sensation of his mouth on her cunny. But she was also crouched above him, facing his feet, hips moving in a rhythm wild and sweet as his tongue and lips sought every secret to bring her pleasure to fruition. And he could see them both, as though from a slight distance, locked together in a timeless, lovely dance of pleasure. Ryllio shuddered, cried out against her quivering flesh, as Myrina bent forward, beautiful lips parting to engulf his desperate erection.

He felt it—the wet heat of her mouth, every flick and flutter of her tongue—felt it as though their bodies truly were locked together. So intense was the sensation, so utterly overwhelming, Ryllio believed for one fractured second he had somehow been transformed into flesh corporeal once more.

Arching into the wild suction of Myrina’s mouth, he forgot everything—the past, his plight, the sorrow of their imminent parting—in the idyllic pleasure of the moment. Reaching up, he covered her cunny with his mouth once more, pouring all the love and longing in his soul into her. Myrina cried out around his cock, her hips writhing, jerking in time to the uncontrolled flaying of his tongue.

He couldn't stop the heat rising from his ballocks—didn't want to stop it, for it had been too long since he felt the incipient power of orgasm.

Catching her clitoris between his lips, Ryllio caught the beat of her plunging mouth and joined it, pulling her into the rush of his orgasm, holding back until she shuddered, releasing him as she cried out in bliss.

Then, only then, did he let go, allowing himself to be transported by the pulsating relief, hoarse cries of delight and love breaking from his throat. Caught in the sensation, shocked, bewildered, Ryllio felt suddenly lost, adrift—straddling the veil—neither alive nor bespelled.

Coming back to himself was difficult, for his heart rebelled against what his body had to admit first by its continued immobility. Everything he had just experienced had been fantasy. The lingering sensations of Myrina on his hands and lips and body were not real.

Grief stricken, he looked to where Myrina stood, swaying slightly amidst the last of the wildflowers. The moon was directly overhead, its rays illuminating the sweet beauty of her face, the soft tilt of her smile. Once more wrapped in her cloak, her body was only a shadowy outline, but he knew every curve and dip, every soft and secret place. Never before had he cared for anyone, loved anyone, as he did her, and the impossibility of that love once more fell on him like a blow.

In the far recesses of his heart there had been a kernel of hope that Myrina and his love for her would set him free. Now, after sharing intimacy beyond anything he had ever imagined, he knew if she could not save him, he was beyond redemption. And the mourning he had experienced before became no more than the passing of a brief storm in comparison to the everlasting maelstrom of sorrow now waiting.

“Ryllio—”

The softness of her voice cut through his agony, but he could not reply. The pain was too deep, too fresh. It filled him with cold, as though the outer stone had finally completed its incursion into his heart and soul, turning him into marble through-and-through.

Again she called to him, and again, but he made no answer. Hardening his breaking heart, he closed himself away, shutting her out of his mind. Better this way, he thought, as he watched her joy turn first to concern, then anger. And when she turned away and ran from the glade, the sounds of her sobs drove through him like blades of ice.

In the silence of the forest, Ryllio sat, slowly releasing the last vestiges of humanity, praying for the moment the marble overtook him completely, erasing the grinding, heart-wrenching torture of lost love.

Chapter Eight

Winter howled into the village like a ravenous wolf, sending stinging ice-clad snow fleeing before a vicious wind. Everyone huddled inside, going out only to tend the animals or complete necessary chores. Myrina at last accepted Goodwife Harbottle's invitation and, closing up her parents' house, moved her mother to the Harbottle farm.

The goodwife was one of her mother's oldest friends and immediately took over the ailing woman's care. That was for the best, Myrina realised, for although she tried to act as normal, numbness surrounded her like an impenetrable globe, disconnecting her from everything and everyone. Not even the knowledge her mother was slipping away seemed able to penetrate fully into her heart. It simply added further distance between her and the rest of the world.

There were decisions she needed to make regarding her future, but the strength of mind necessary to consider them eluded her. The farmer who leased her father's fields was pressing to buy them, demanding a decision before the following spring. In the past she recalled having strong views on keeping the land, but couldn't remember why it had seemed so important.

In truth, Myrina acknowledged, nothing mattered anymore. When she ate, it was because the food lay before her—if she drank it was by rote, her body taking what it needed to survive without asking leave of her mind. There was nothing she wanted or craved—nothing that could move her to more than the slightest smile, the merest frown. After sitting by her sleeping mother's side for hours on end, she would rise and not be able to recall even one passing thought while she was there.

The one thing she could not think on at all was the glade and what lay there. On occasion something would bring it to mind—the scent of wild sage clinging to Farmer Harbottle's coat, a glimpse of the moon, full and glowing, outside the window. At those times Myrina became aware of pain lurking just beyond consciousness, waiting to burst free and devour her. Even as it made her gasp, her mind shied desperately away, hiding once more in the clouds fogging her head.

She had no memory of her dreams, and for that she was grateful. Some mornings her pillow was wet from a storm of tears passing in the night. At other times she drifted up from sleep with a hollow, tender ache deep inside, as though in the unremembered reaches of the night something precious lay within her grasp, which the rising sun caused to melt away.

“I wish she would cry, Mam, or get angry.” Elawen’s voice, filled with annoyance, one day drifted to where Myrina stood outside the kitchen. “Anything would be better than seeing her drift about like a ghost.”

Not waiting to hear the goodwife’s reply, Myrina continued on her way to her mother’s bedside. Indeed she felt as insubstantial as a spirit—or a vessel spun from crystal threads, awaiting the blow that would cause it to shatter.

Her mother was awake, awareness gleaming in pain-filled eyes, and Myrina forced her lips into the shadow of a smile, knowing it was not what it should be, unable to do any better.

“Can I get you anything, Mama?”

“Do you have my ring, darling?” Her mother’s voice was thin, an audible representation of her hold on life. “I miss it.”

Slipping the simple golden band from her own finger, Myrina placed it back on her mother’s, where it belonged. The skeletal hand closed tight to keep it in place, and a smile of contentment brightened her mother’s face. Placing her other hand protectively over the ring, she closed her eyes once more and slept.

The trembling began at Myrina’s toes, rising to turn her legs to jelly, her stomach to a writhing mass of pain. When she reached out to grasp the nearby chair, it was with a hand as palsied as that of a woman twice, thrice her age.

Agony clasped her in unrelenting arms, stopping her breathing. Nausea churned, threatening to bear her down to her knees.

All her life she had seen the love between her parents—never overt or demonstrative, but subtle—in the sharing of a glance, a passing touch, a small thoughtful gesture. The simple motion of her mother’s hand, guarding the symbol of their life together, revealed the essential, eternal connection between them—something her daughter craved beyond all desire and would now never know.

Lowering her body to sit, Myrina finally faced the extent of her loss, and it was all she could do not to wail, to howl like a dying beast. When her

father died, taking with him the security and safety of her world, she had been too busy to mourn. Perhaps in time she would have done so, but then her mother became ill and it was all she could do to cope, hold their lives together as best she could. There had been no one to share her pain, no time to truly feel the sorrow growing stronger and stronger each day.

In Ryllio she had sought and found solace, understanding, belonging. That fleeting taste of love had lifted her beyond the present pain, giving a teasing foretaste of what could be. To have known him—his passion and tenderness—to have been accepted, desired, needed, just as she was, and then to feel him fade once more to stone was more than she could stand.

Covering her eyes with shaking hands, tears seeping out between her fingers, she rocked back and forth against the onslaught of anguish. All the losses in her life were too much to bear—the torment tearing at her heart would surely lead to madness or death.

“Come with me, little one.” Myrina only dimly heard the goodwife’s soft voice in her ear, hardly felt the gentle hands urging her to rise. “Come away where you can cry in peace.”

And wrapped in the goodwife’s tender care, Myrina cried and cried until she felt there were no more tears left in the world.

“I was wondering when this would happen,” the older woman murmured, stroking Myrina’s hair. “Even the strongest of us must give in to the tears sometime, and you have more reason than most to cry.”

“I want to die too.” She hadn’t meant to say it aloud, but the words burst from her throat, bringing a fresh paroxysm of weeping.

“I know,” Goodwife Harbottle soothed. “Everyone feels that way when they see everything they hold dear falling apart before their eyes. But you have the strength to go on, Myrina. Life is a hard road, no doubt about it. Each time we think it has smoothed out for a pace, another mountain rises ahead. ’Tis just the way of the world, sweetling. All we can do is struggle on, do our best, and hope ’tis enough.”

Exhausted, Myrina made no effort to protest when the goodwife tucked her into bed, although it was the middle of the day, and she drifted to sleep in moments...

...and found herself in the glade, wind-whipped snow thrashing her face and arms with an icy sting, biting and stabbing at her exposed skin.

“Ryllio,” she shouted, trying to see him, go to him, but the swirling flakes created a veil of whiteness, and the buffeting wind held her in place.

“Why do you call to him, Myrina Traihune?” A mocking voice came to her and, turning her head, squinting against the flying crystals, she saw a golden-haired man standing in distant sunlight. “You never truly cared for him. If you had, he would be free.”

“What do you mean?” she cried, fear clawing at her heart, more chilling than the winter’s cold. “Was there some way I could have freed him, something I didn’t do that I should? Tell me, please, and it shall be done.”

The golden-haired faery shrugged, his lips tilted in a mocking smile. “I have no spell to rule the dictates of a human heart, the conscience of a human soul. It is too late, anyway, for the prince is almost completely stone now, by his own doing. Once there was a chance for him, but now he will never again awake.”

“No!” Myrina struggled against the icy bonds restricting her movement, the torturous agony of his words. “That cannot be true. He but sleeps awhile, as Mab dictates, and will awaken once more at her whim.”

With a sardonic lift of his brows, the faery replied, “The spark of life that once beat within the stone is all but gone. So it is when a man loses all he holds dear—especially hope.”

“No! Ryllio,” she cried again, “Ryllio, please, don’t go. Help him.” She turned once more to the faery, holding out her hands in appeal. “Help him, please.”

“There is nothing more I can do, Myrina Traihune.” He began to fade from sight, taking the sparkle of sunlight with him, leaving her in an icy grey miasma. “Except to wish you peace.”

She awoke, sitting up, arms still outstretched, heart pounding in fear and sorrow. Around her, the farmhouse slumbered. Outside the wind moaned and sighed in perfect harmony with her soul.

It was just a dream—vivid, realistic and terrifying—she told herself, even as she was swinging her feet over the edge of the bed. She had not been visited by Kestor, the golden faery Ryllio spoke of, but had simply created him and his words from her own imagination. Yet, driven by a compulsion too strong to resist, she pulled on her stockings and tied them in place and dressed in a warm wool petticoat and overdress.

There was no room for thought, only action, although everything around her seemed suddenly bright and sharp despite the darkness. Instinct guided her to her mother’s bedside, where she placed a kiss on the paper-dry cheek before quietly going downstairs. Farmer Harbottle’s hound lifted its head as

she passed through the kitchen, tail thumping on the wooden floor as it watched her lace her boots. Swinging her cloak over her shoulders, she bade the hound stay as she opened the door and slipped out into the night.

Cold connected with her face like a slap, stealing her breath. The snow lay in huge drifted heaps against the building, having blown off the clean-swept fields. For a moment she faltered, wondering if it were even possible to find her way to Ryllio without his call, but determination pushed the thought aside, and she began to trudge as fast as she could toward the trees.

Time lost all meaning as she fought her way through the forest, slipping and falling in the snow, coming back upon her own footprints and striking off in another direction. The cold was intense, made bearable only by the fire of her resolve. On and on she went, until the sky above her began to lighten with the dawn and, shivering, she began to despair.

"Please," she whispered to the wind. "Please, help me find him."

A golden glow lit the trees ahead of her, and Myrina stumbled toward it, but then came abruptly to a halt, a cry of distress breaking from her lips.

The glade was filled with snow, the thicket covered with mounds of white. Only by the thorny branches of bracken protruding from the drift could she tell where it was. Forging her way to it threatened to sap the last of her strength but, once there, she found the wherewithal to shake the snow from the brush.

"Oh, Ryllio." Tears prickled behind her eyes as she looked at the statue. There was no sign of life, any spark or sensation to indicate his presence, and Myrina knew she was too late.

But although her mind said so, her heart would not be deterred. Without thought she pushed through the underbrush, hardly feeling the thorns tearing at her clothing and skin, until she stood before the statue and could touch it. With gentle care she brushed away the snow clinging to his hair and face and shoulders, traced the handsome lines of cheek and brow, nose and mouth. The tears she could no longer contain slid down her cheeks at the feel of the cold marble.

"Ryllio," she whispered, "I would do anything to help you be free. Don't give up, please. Give me more time."

There was no response except from the wind, sobbing and sighing through the trees. Stepping nearer yet, Myrina straddled his snow-covered legs, opened her cloak and bent to envelop Ryllio in the sodden wool. The need to be close to him, even though nothing but frigid stone awaited her,

was too strong to resist. Arms around his shoulders for balance, she lowered herself to his lap, ignoring the shivers racing through her blood as she came in full contact with his icy form.

Pressing her cheek to his, hands compulsively exploring his back, his nape, she fit her lips to the hollow beneath his ear and began to speak.

“Don’t leave me, Ryllio, for I will never give up trying to set you free. If I have to find a portal into the world of the Fey, seek out Mab herself and beg for your release, I will do it.”

Still all she heard was the evil wind shaking and creaking in the old forest—all she felt was the numbing cold surrounding her—but she would not be deterred, would not cease until she knew he listened.

“Kestor wished me peace in my dream tonight, but I will not know true peace or even seek it until the spell binding you here is broken. Hold on to that hope, my darling, until I come back to you again.”

She was shivering, almost turning to stone with him. Soon she would have to leave, find shelter and warmth, or forfeit to death her quest to find the key to unlock his prison. There was one more thing she had to tell him before the unrelenting cold forced her back to the village. Settling even closer, she cradled his cheeks in her hands and looked into his unseeing eyes.

“When you told me not to come back, when you sent me away, I should never have listened. Come back to me, Ryllio, as I have come back to you. I love you too much to let you go now, or ever.”

Leaning forward, she pressed her lips to his in one final, desperate gesture.

Pulling away, she gave him a last lingering look, committing every plane and curve of his face to memory before placing her hands on his shoulders and trying to rise.

And found she could not move.

Chapter Nine

A rush of warm, herb-scented air gusted through the hollow as dawn burst upon them, gilding Ryllio's face with a golden, ruddy glow. Captivated by the suddenly life-like look of his skin, Myrina stilled, lifting one hand to touch her fingers to his cheek. When he blinked and Myrina found herself looking into the beautiful green eyes of her dreams, a little scream of mingled fear and happiness burst from her throat.

It was his arms wrapped tight around her, she now realised, stemming her ability to rise. And as she felt the supple heat of his skin beneath her hand, the shift of hard muscles under her legs, the rapid rise and fall of his chest as he breathed, tears overcame her to flow freely down her cheeks.

There was no need for words. Ryllio lowered his head just as she raised her mouth to his and, as their lips touched, clung, parted, only to come together again, Myrina thought her heart would explode with joy.

Over and over they kissed, unable to get enough of each other. Where before she shivered with cold, now it was the fire of their passion warming her from within. Ryllio's trembling hands swept beneath her cloak, stroking and exploring her back and arms and legs, fingers tangling into her hair, touching her cheeks. Myrina could only hold him close, closer, leaning into his broad, strong chest, wanting never to let him go.

Their kisses grew more frantic. Myrina opened her lips, welcoming the wicked sweep of his tongue, tangling hers with it, demanding even more intimacy. As he pulled back, she followed, catching his lower lip between her teeth, caressing it with gentle licks that drew him, sighing, back to her mouth.

Ryllio insinuated his hands between them, cupping her breasts, thumbs unerringly finding the straining tips through wool and linen. Suddenly unable to catch her breath, Myrina gasped, arched into the loving, sensuous touch.

His cock was hard against her stomach, and she slid her arms down his sides, across his rippling stomach, until she cupped the pulsating length of it in her palms. With a moan, Ryllio broke free from her mouth, pressing his

lips to her eyes and cheeks, trailing a string of kisses to her ear, down to her neck. Between each touch of his mouth he whispered her name and confessed his love, in a chanted spell of binding and protection.

Ryllio was free, alive, in her arms.

The knowledge broke over Myrina with the force of a gale, heightening the already overwhelming need to merge herself with him in every way. Racked with passion, she pulled at her skirts, lifting them from around her legs. Ryllio gripped her hands, stopping her, and when she looked up into his intensely gleaming eyes, Myrina felt her heart lurch.

“Wait, love.” He was trembling, his voice rough with longing, but he held her still with gentle strength. “There is no need to rush. Let me make sure you are ready.”

Myrina felt a smile curve her lips and a sweet tender place open in her heart. Holding his gaze, she replied, “I’ve been waiting for you, Ryllio, wanting you since the first time I heard your voice.”

Braced against his hands, she rose onto her toes, and Ryllio shuddered with her as the tip of his erection slipped between the lips of her quim. Tilting her hips so as to position them perfectly, Myrina felt her thighs tremble, the inexorable pull of ecstasy making her pulse deep inside. Ryllio’s face tightened, his eyes becoming feverish, the breath rasping from his throat, but he held completely still beneath her slow and unrelenting seduction. Myrina leaned forward, touching her lips to his as she whispered, “Will you make me wait longer, my love?”

“No,” he sighed. “No.”

But still he didn’t move, ceding the choice to her, letting her know his paramount desire was for her—her need, her pleasure. The beauty of it, the glorious sense of control, filled her to overflowing, made her love for him deepen even more.

Slowly she pressed down, her body flowering open to receive his cock, feeling him stretch and fill her until they clung together, so intrinsically joined she knew she would never again be whole without him.

Instinctively she began to move, rock, undulate. Ryllio released her hands to cup her cheeks, kissing her over and over, his tongue keeping pace with the motion of their hips. The sensations swirled, built, climbed inside, demanding she move faster, harder, against him.

Ryllio responded to her unspoken need, thrusting up to meet each downward plunge, giving her all she wanted and more. Until, battered by a

surfeit of pleasure, Myrina felt ecstasy explode within and, crying out his name, surrendered to the sweet unstoppable joy.

Still reeling from the force of her release, she felt Ryllio's arms shift as he rose, lifting her unresisting body, still intimately joined with his. Wrapping her legs as securely as she could around his waist, Myrina let her cheek fall to his shoulder and forced her eyes open as he walked out of the bracken.

What she saw as he carried her into the glade should not really have been surprising, but nonetheless it was. The snow had disappeared, and the hollow was once more green with grass and ferns, paved with flowers of every type and hue.

Kneeling once more, Ryllio laid her gently down amongst the blooms and unclasped her cloak from around her neck. As his fingers found the first button of her overdress, he hesitated, bending closer to whisper, "I want to see you, touch you, kiss you everywhere, but we have company."

Myrina turned her head to where he gestured, saw the red buck and white doe in the shadow of the trees, silently watching. And she knew where they were, most likely so would Kestor be, always waiting for a chance to spy upon them.

Looking up at Ryllio, feeling the still-urgent pulse of his flesh inside her, she felt a flush of renewed desire burn through her veins. There was no hint of fear or shame when she imagined the king and queen of the faeries, or Kestor, watching Ryllio and her together. In fact it made the moment sweeter, hotter—even more magical than it already was.

Brushing his hands aside, she unbuttoned her bodice herself and, shrugging it off, murmured, "It seems only fair, considering you spied upon them. Besides, I care not if the entire world of Faery wants to watch. All I need right now is you."

Ryllio made a sound, half-laugh, half-groan. "What happened to the shy maid I once saw blushing as she touched herself before me?"

Myrina looked deep into his twinkling eyes and, smiling, replied, "You awoke her passion and changed her blushes of embarrassment to those of desire. Is that not a good thing?"

"A very, very good thing indeed," he replied, kissing her lips and setting himself back to the task of undressing her.

There in the light of dawn, surrounded by the scent of flowers, she lay supine beneath Ryllio's tender, thorough exploration of her body, absorbing

each breath and sigh and sound of pleasure into her overly sensitive skin. Although she could no longer hear him in her mind, the connection between them was as strong and sure as ever before. Shifting, flowing beneath his hands and lips, Myrina knew instinctively his yearning to simply touch and kiss her, to bring her pleasure over and over again.

Fantasy became reality, and Myrina closed her eyes against the almost painful glory of his lips against her breasts and belly, the swirl of his tongue around her navel, sliding down, parting her quim. His groan of bliss rushed across and into her flesh, and she looked along her body, meeting his fever-bright gaze. The look in his eyes, the love and passion, unravelled the last of her control, and she reached for him, threading her fingers into the dark, silken hair, lifting her hips as she pulled him closer.

Open-mouthed, he kissed her slick flesh, the flicking and lashing of his tongue making her cry out his name as she strained and arched and quaked. Wider she spread herself for him, and wider yet, inviting, demanding, drowning in the fervent intimacy.

When she could no longer bear not to touch him a moment more, he came to her, surrendering his body even though the desperation of his desire sent tiny shivers of need through his muscles to ripple across his skin.

Later, she decided, would be soon enough to touch, tease and tantalize Ryllio the way he had so lovingly tormented her. But now he needed her, needed the release he seemed determined to deny. Urging him into the cradle of her thighs, she took him deep, lifting her head to press drugging kisses on his lips.

“Myrina,” he whispered, his strong arms trembling with the force of his passion. “Myrina, I am yours, now and forever.”

It was a pledge, a promise, a love-spell. The quiet vow of days and nights to come—an incantation to cling to, no matter what the future held.

Overcome by too much emotion to reply, she held the echo of his words dear, knowing them to be part of the strongest magic here or beyond the veil—and needing nothing more.

And What Happened Next?

All faery tales end with “And They Lived Happily Ever After”, but that is because the Fey, whispering into authors’ ears, usually grow bored once the magic ceases being part of the story. Never much given to mundane considerations, they care not what happens after the spell is lifted. If asked, “How did Red Riding Hood explain the talking wolf?” or “How come Cinderella wasn’t accused of stealing the dress and shoes?” they tend to shrug and disappear. Or threaten the questioner with gruesome retribution for being, well, so nosy.

So usually there is no answer to the eternal cry, “And what happened next?” except what we find in our own imagination. However, in the case of Myrina and her prince, it could be said the lingering enchantment was strong enough to hold the interest of one particular faery. This is what I heard, under the light of a red harvest moon, of their life thereafter.

By the time Myrina and Ryllio returned to the Harbottle farm, they found the place in an uproar. Elawen was weeping, the goodwife in a temper, and Farmer Harbottle just about to mount his fat little pony and ride to the village for help in searching for the missing Myrina. When the farm residents saw the two cold, damp figures emerge from the woods, their joy was indescribable, and to everyone’s eternal shock Goodwife Harbottle burst into tears.

After a massive hug from the goodwife, and a sound scolding, Myrina told them the story. It was, however, the abridged version—leaving out the fact Ryllio had once been a prince, along with all the touching and swiving, and the exhibitionist tendencies she’d discovered in herself. There were some things, she reasoned, they really didn’t need to know.

In light of the Harbottles’ no-nonsense attitude, she wasn’t sure the story would be believed, but Myrina was again surprised, this time by their calm acceptance. There were, the farmer told her, many strange things in the woods—unheard of because no one spoke of them for fear of being called crazed. The goodwife simply nodded and offered Ryllio another bowl of

porridge, beaming with pleasure when he complimented her on how delicious it was.

Myrina took Ryllio to meet her mother, and he showed the elder lady such tender and courtly concern she was thoroughly charmed. Afterwards she told the goodwife she was of a mind not to die just yet, being loath to leave her daughter to manage a man so handsome and winning on her own. Every woman in the village, she opined, and many from the lands around would be panting as soon as they saw him. Myrina needed someone with a stout stick to beat them away.

Ryllio, taking the surname Trennek, which was one of his father's many names, was introduced in the village as one of Farmer Harbottle's far-flung relatives come for a visit, and no one seemed to think anything of it. He did indeed attract much feminine attention, but had eyes only for Myrina. Although Mrs. Traihune was true to her word and rallied, living long enough to see her first grandchildren, she never had need of the ironwood cudgel she kept behind the kitchen door.

Ryllio, with Farmer Harbottle's guidance, learned to till and sow and reap the land, and thought himself the luckiest man alive. On occasion he remarked the life of Farmer Trennek was far more satisfying than the one he lived as Prince Ryllio, such comments usually being made after he and his wife had indulged in one of their frequent naughty trysts in the woods. Or their bedroom. Or the hayloft. Or, on one memorable occasion, under the kitchen table, with his hands tied firmly to the massive oak legs.

Myrina hadn't trusted the strength of their bed frame.

"And they did, indeed, live happily ever after," Kestor whispers to me, his eyes gleaming in the moonlight, that whimsical smile tilting the corners of his mouth. I have no reason not to believe him, for Kestor and I understand each other and have struck a mutually beneficial bargain.

"Tell me another tale," I ask, but he lays a finger across my lips and gestures across the moonlit glade.

As my human lover comes through the trees, softly calling my name, Kestor places a lingering kiss on my shoulder, and whispers in reply as I step into the flower-strewn hollow: "Later."

About the Author

After living a checkered past, and despite an avowed disinterest in domestication, Anya has settled in Ontario, Canada, with a husband, the youngest of their three children and two increasingly fat cats. All her living companions know to leave her alone when they see her hunched over the keyboard—with the exception of the cats, who couldn't care less, especially if the food bowl is empty.

To find out more about her writing, and probably far too much other information, drop by Anya's website at www.anyarichards.com or her blog at anyarichards.blogspot.com.

Look for these titles by Anya Richards

Now Available:

Night of the Cereus
The Pearl at the Gate
Breaking Free

Marriage? No, thanks. She'd rather kiss a dragon.

Slayer

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An Enchanted Story

All Prince Cahill needs to assume the throne is one simple thing: a wife. Except every virgin princess in the kingdom has turned up deflowered before the deal can be sealed. The very next maiden to cross this threshold, he vows, will be his bride.

When she appears—injured, half-frozen and reeking of dragon dung—he holds to his promise and puts her to the final test to prove her worthiness. A test that involves a mattress and a pea.

Breanna couldn't be less interested in marriage, especially to a cocksure royal like Cahill. Since losing her family to a dragon horde, she has become the continent's finest slayer—a job she doesn't plan on giving up until the last dragon's blood drips from her sword.

Yet her sleepless nights are plagued with visions of Cahill doing wicked things to her untutored body. And when she fights at his side to repel a dragon attack, her visions become delicious reality.

But Queen Eleanor, whose reign is about to end, has no intention of giving up her power. Not to Prince Cahill, and certainly not to some young upstart...

Warning: This book contains corruption, seduction, conspiracy and magically-induced erotic dreams. And that's just the first chapter.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Slayer:

Cahill hung from the tree, like Brea had taught him, trying to regulate his breathing, but finding it difficult with a glob of dragon shit sliding down his left cheek. This was soon forgotten, however, when the thundering hooves of an approaching horse alerted him to action. It was Brea riding Elrond hard, heading straight for him with a fire-breather right on her tail.

"Attack from above," Brea had said. "Dragons never look up."

Brea flew by, then Cahill let go of the branch, landing squarely straddling the beast's neck. With one swift movement, he pulled his sword, lifted it high and drove it to the hilt through the black slit in the dragon's yellow eye.

"Think of it as a bulls-eye," Brea had instructed.

Sure enough, death came instantly. The dragon's wings stretched taut in its final convulsion and the stinking body glided gently to the ground where Cahill was able to easily slide off. He jogged to join Brea and Elrond a safe distance away before the body went up in flames. "I can't believe it!" he crowed. "It's so easy."

Brea narrowed her eyes and scoffed, "Easy?"

"I mean efficient," Cahill said and grinned. "There's no hacking at a writhing neck covered in almost impenetrable scales. No fire, no mess." He raised his hand to Brea to pull her down from the horse and she accepted the help without hesitation. "We make quite a team."

She nodded, but her face was turned to the surrounding countryside where only blackened patches on the ground indicated the number of dragons that died that day. "That's it," Brea sighed. "We did it. We killed them all."

In a voice filled with wonder and dread, Cahill said, "Maybe not all. What the hell is that?"

Brea followed his outstretched arm and finger and then muttered, "Fuck a duck."

Cahill swung his head to look at her in surprise, then turned his attention back to the monster that glided overhead.

"That, my prince, is the beast that gave me this." Cahill glanced back at Brea and to where she was pointing down at her leggings which were stained where her old wound had reopened and oozed blood.

"You fought that thing?" he said with admiration.

Brea nodded grimly. "As you can see, it won."

Slowly Cahill shook his head back and forth. "You're still here," he said. "I call that a draw."

The enormous dragon circled high overhead, squawking shrilly so that both Cahill and Brea had to cover their ears. Then it swooped, flying low over the land, its head swaying back and forth as if looking for something, or someone. Finally the dragon rose and flew off, out of sight.

"We'll save that one for another day," Cahill said as he reached for her hand and squeezed it.

Brea settled back against the copper tub, her knees drawn to her chest, reveling in the soothing warmth of the water. She'd washed first in a nearby stream, but only lye soap would get the dragon smell out of her hair. As for

her clothes, the cook had confiscated them in order to boil them in vinegar in hopes of removing the stink. After another dunk of her head beneath the water, Brea rose, dripping, and used a blanket to dry herself. Cahill had given her one of his spare shirts to wear and Brea laughed at herself as she cinched the garment around her waist with a strip of leather. It was long enough to be a dress. Not a proper dress, but a nightdress at least, and that's all she needed it for. Her clothes would be dry enough by morning when the company rode out.

Peeking out through the tent flap, Brea called to Cahill's valet to remove the washtub and bring in some food. She tucked a fur around her shoulders for decency's sake, then Brea sat at the table and waited for the food and Cahill to arrive. He came in moments later, smelling clean and masculine. Brea kept her lashes lowered as a sudden shyness descended over her.

They ate in relative silence, making mundane remarks about the flavor of this dish and that. Finally Cahill cleared his throat and said, "I cannot go on like this. I must make my intentions known."

Slowly Brea looked up from her food. The firelight flickered in Cahill's dark eyes, making him appear more sinister than regal.

"Breanna, I beg you. No, I beseech you to consent to be my wife."

Though Brea knew it was coming, had known his intentions all along, her answer became lodged in her throat. She licked her suddenly dry lips and said, "I'm sorry, Cahill. I can't."

He didn't move for a long time. Finally he spoke. "Why?"

All her old resentments, her old prejudices about marriage reared their ugly heads in her mind. "I know how these things work. The minute I marry you, I belong to you. I give up everything."

"What do you give up?" Cahill argued. "Marry me and you gain a title and a kingdom."

"Both of which I already have," Brea countered.

"Bah!" Cahill fumed. "You have nothing."

"Nothing?" Brea rose in anger. "I have everything I need, Prince." She limped purposefully around to the other side of the table, using the fact that he was still seated to her advantage. "I don't need your land, I don't need your title." With each item she listed, she poked him in the shoulder. "I don't need a stinking husband to making demands of me once he thinks he owns me."

"What do you mean, make demands?"

“Don’t pretend you don’t know what I’m talking about. I’m not one of your sheltered young princesses who has no idea of the filthy rutting tendencies of men. I know what goes on behind closed doors.”

Cahill’s expression changed. First understanding, then shock, and then anger. “You’re not a virgin,” he said in a low voice. “Someone abused you.”

Brea laughed. “No, I’m a virgin.” She pulled her dagger out from her leather belt and twisted it between her hands. “I wouldn’t let a stinking, breeding male near enough to abuse me.”

Cahill frowned. “Then what do you know of things that take place ‘behind closed doors’?”

“You may find this shocking, Your Highness, but commoners rut regardless of whether doors are open or closed. In fact doors have very little to do with it. Stables, tavern floors, up against walls.” Brea shivered with revulsion. “Beastly copulations. No thank you.”

“Ah,” Cahill said. “A tavern education.” He stood, and Brea found herself no longer at an advantage. “I’m afraid, Princess, your education may be lacking. What you have witnessed is only a very limited version of the act in question.”

“I’d wager I know more than enough.”

“A wager.” The prince smiled as he lifted her chin with his thumb, forcing her to look at him. “Now that’s a wager I’d be willing to take.”

Brea scowled, but Cahill tightened his grip on her chin, holding her in place. “What if I was to convince you otherwise, Princess? What if I was to prove there was more to this carnal act than you are aware and what if I was to wager that by the end of it, you will be begging me to take you to our marriage bed?”

Still holding her dagger, Brea pressed the tip into the juncture of his rib cage. With satisfaction she watched his eyes widen at the sharp pain of it. “I will make no such wager.”

Cahill released her face and stepped back, out of the reach of her dagger’s lethal point. “Because you know you’ll lose.”

“Ha!”

“Remind me, Brea, who was tugging at the draw to my breeches the other day. I might be mistaken, but I’m almost certain it was you.”

“You swine!”

“Yes. A talking swine, at that. Come on, Brea. Stop fighting it.” His hand moved so swiftly she wasn’t able to get away in time. He grasped her wrist

and squeezed until she dropped the dagger. Then he pulled Brea to the bed of furs and pushed her down. “Tell me you don’t want me.”

“I don’t want you,” she snapped. And she didn’t. Not logically. But apparently her hands did because they wound around Cahill’s neck and pulled him down onto the furs beside her.

One act of kindness cements a destiny she couldn't fathom.

Wolf

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An Enchanted Story

As a child, the Lost Woods were Hannah's passion. A place where she dreamed of mysterious creatures, including one she saved—a man who magically changed into a wolf. Now, twelve years later, the woods are her refuge from a horde of marauders who killed her mother.

This time, it is the wolf who saves her. And he is no dream.

Stephan can't help but remember the time Hannah encouraged him to free his injured leg and continue the soul journey required of his kind. The child unwittingly bound herself to him, and now the woman tempts him like no other. Yet if she learns his secret, her fragile trust could be broken for all time.

Hannah doesn't see how she can possibly fit into Stephan's world—especially when their overwhelming passion reveals the one reason she should not trust him. Stephan has fought more than his share of battles, but the one for Hannah's heart is the one that could break his own...

Warning: Kickass, shape-shifting alphas will leave you breathlessly begging for Lost Woods. Be careful...they may know what you think!

Enjoy the following excerpt for Wolf:

Stephan.

My pulse quickened and I fiddled with the hem of my borrowed dress. I gawked at his powerful body as he greeted Nalla. His eyes danced with adoration when around her, and I wished I could see the same glimmer in his eyes when he thought of me.

The same type of clinging leather pants molded against his powerful thighs. Muscle rippled across his stomach, partially visible through the open wood-colored vest. His chest was unmarred by hair. My fingers longed to trace the contours of his smooth skin.

Heat spread through me to center at my nether regions. I squeezed my thighs together and looked down because I was afraid my cheeks were stained with shame. My attraction to him had grown, and my body refused to behave.

His long legs brought him to me faster than I was prepared for. I stood, my legs wobbling as my breathing accelerated. His hands grasped my arms, steadying me with a strength that made me shiver. Not even the mightiest of my village's fighters were so honed and muscular. I'd seen enough of his people to know none of the men in his pride were like the men I was accustomed to.

"Thanks."

Thanks. Not only was it a naïve and foolish thing to say, but it came out with a meekness that made my mind scream at my blathering tongue. I'd thought of clever retorts and envisioned conversations with him about many things for the past few nights. I'd even fantasized about him.

And all I had to say when he stood before me was "thanks". A flicker of darkness appeared and disappeared in his golden eyes.

Nalla shuffled a chair. The dragging sound across the bare floor of the eating area pulled me from my lustful thoughts. I focused my attention to where his fingers touched my skin. Tingles danced there and spread through me like molten fire. Heat rushed to my core. My pussy moistened. My nipples hardened.

I fought the urge to tug on my dress or look down to see if it was apparent. I refused to sever my contact with him.

"She's been asking about you." Nalla's voice quashed the connection I'd felt. I stepped back enough to allow my heartbeat to slow, but his assessing gaze remained on me, and I was lost in the tumbling waves of desire his presence had incited.

"Really?" His voice, filled with curiosity, made me smile. "I've been catching up on pride issues. Some of it is quite tedious. I'm sure your company would have broken up the monotony."

"She has a restless spirit, much like you." Nalla chuckled. "Were she one of us, she'd be prowling in animal form."

Stephan grinned. I couldn't understand their amusement, but I knew she had no ill regard for me. She sat at the table and regarded us.

"Is her leg healing well?" he asked.

I hadn't realized how injured my leg was until Nalla had begun treating it. "Those poultices of hers don't burn anymore. Surely that's a good sign."

Nalla laughed. The rich tones of her wise voice soothed me. I hadn't realized I missed my gran until that moment. They were too alike for me not to be drawn to her.

“She’s been asking about your talisman and wanted to walk the village. Perhaps you can appease her.”

“Sure.” His voice was low. “I’ll gladly tell her why she has our talisman and what it represents.”

“Your father wouldn’t approve.”

“Then it’s a good thing I stopped heeding his advice long ago. If anyone has need of me, send Fallon for me.”

Fallon. “He’s your brother, right?”

“I see you’ve been learning of my family. I trust Nalla’s delighted in telling you many stories of my foolish youth.”

I wished that was the case. The woman had offered nothing.

“I will, now that I see you approve.”

Stephan chuckled and touched my arm. The contact made my skin tingle. “Let us go before she starts now.”

His arm rested on my back just above my waist. Cool air whipped through my hair when we exited the home I’d been locked away in. Unable to contain my glee, I paused and took a deep breath.

“I should’ve come sooner, but Nalla kept telling me you needed to heal.”

“She’s very protective.”

“It’s in her blood. Women in my clan have been healers for many generations.” His hand fell away from me when we began to walk through his village.

Everyone halted their activities as we passed. I found their scrutiny disconcerting. The first few moved to their knees as if about to undertake a chore I didn’t understand. All the homes we passed resembled one another. Most displayed a talisman on the entry.

I tried to study them without being obvious, but decided it best not to when Stephan drew me closer to him.

“Your people don’t like me.”

“They’re unaccustomed to strangers. There’s a difference.” The sincerity calmed my nervousness even though I doubted it was the truth for everyone.

“I’ve heard some of them yelling at Nalla.” I winced when his jaw twitched. “She tries to hide it, but I hear them. They want me gone.”

“She should have told me this. I would’ve dealt with their meddling myself.”

I shook my head. “They have a right to be upset. I’m doing nothing to earn my keep and am not of your pride.”

We continued our path toward the woods and my pulse quickened when I realized he didn’t intend to remain within the village. A few awkward smiles greeted me once we neared a group of homes with the same talisman that I wore around my neck.

“This is your family’s area?”

He nodded. “On my father’s side.”

“Why isn’t Nalla here? She displays this talisman, yet is on the other side of the village.”

“She’s on my mother’s side, but may display whichever talisman she feels within her soul since she’s a healer. She’s chosen this one since it’s stronger than her other option.”

“Do all your kind get that option?”

“Only the healers or those within the royal line.” His hand returned to my back and drew me toward him until my thigh brushed his as we walked.

“You gather information well.” My mind swelled with his admiration.

He paused and turned me to face him. His attention moved to the village, now a good distance from our secluded cove. I was fascinated by the large tree misshapen by time. Its trunk was hollowed near the base. A small sitting stool rested within the area.

“This is my retreat.”

“It’s beautiful.”

His fingers grazed my cheek. My heart flailed in my chest. He’d brought me here—trusted me with his private spot. Could he be feeling the heat between us as I did? My breathing became ragged. My nipples ached with a hardness my naïve mind couldn’t deny. My entire body yearned for Stephan.

“You have no idea what hunger you incite in me, Hannah.” His breath fell against my forehead as he drew me forward until my hips collided with his groin. “Your thoughts drive me mad with the need to possess you.”

I stumbled on his statement, but any attempt to understand it vanished when his hand wrapped in my hair and he drew me to his lips. I closed my eyes. Unable to breathe, I prayed my pounding pulse wouldn’t explode with the turbulent flames of anticipation burning me.

His lips caressed mine and his tongue tasted my mouth, tracing the contours before foraying to my tongue. I swallowed his groan, thinking it

more of a growl. My arms wrapped around him.

The kiss was unexpected and unlike any of the wayward advances village men had made—not that many had tried. I followed his lead and clung to him, my body burning with a need I didn't understand or know how to sate. All I knew was Stephan would absolve me from my raging desires.

His kiss grew more demanding, more consuming. I relished his body crushed against mine. Heat spread through my legs as he lifted my dress. I moaned when he guided me toward the tree until my back was pressed against it. His hand ran up my thigh while his mouth claimed mine.

His other hand rubbed an aching nipple through my dress. I longed to strip and feel his fingers on me there. A growl echoed around us and mingled with my gasp as his fingers found my pussy.

Hot lips moved to my ear. The huskiness of his voice rumbled through me. "You're so wet for me, Hannah."

Awaken

Anya Richards

An angry fairy queen trapped his body. A woman's love could imprison his heart.

An Enchanted Story

Prince Ryllio once lived so charmed a life, even he began to believe nothing bad could touch him. Then a moment's indiscretion brought Queen Mab's wrath raining down, encasing him in stone.

Hundreds of years later, he is losing hope that anyone will find him, much less counter the spell. Until a beautiful young woman wanders into his hidden glade to privately discover the pleasures of her own body. Her sensual innocence reignites his acute longing for freedom.

Lured into the old forest by an irresistible impulse, Myrina finds intimate communion with Ryllio's imprisoned spirit. His whispered guidance weaves an erotic spell, rousing her to undreamed heights of ecstasy.

The intertwining of their minds comes at a devastating price. As each encounter intensifies, Myrina falls in love with a man she can never touch. And Ryllio realizes he must give up the last vestiges of his humanity—or condemn her to a life devoid of a flesh-and-blood lover...

Warning: Bawdy faeries cause mayhem and wicked self-love abounds, as a voyeuristic prince and a shy but willing commoner both get a fine erotic comeuppance (put the emphasis in "comeuppance" where you will).

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